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G W E N W Y N N .

G W E N W Y N N:

A Romance of the Alps.

BY

CAPTAIN MAYNE REID,

AUTHOR OF "LOST LENORE," "THE WHITE GAUNTLET," "HALF-BLOOD,"
"THE RIFLE RANGERS," "THE MAROON," ETC.

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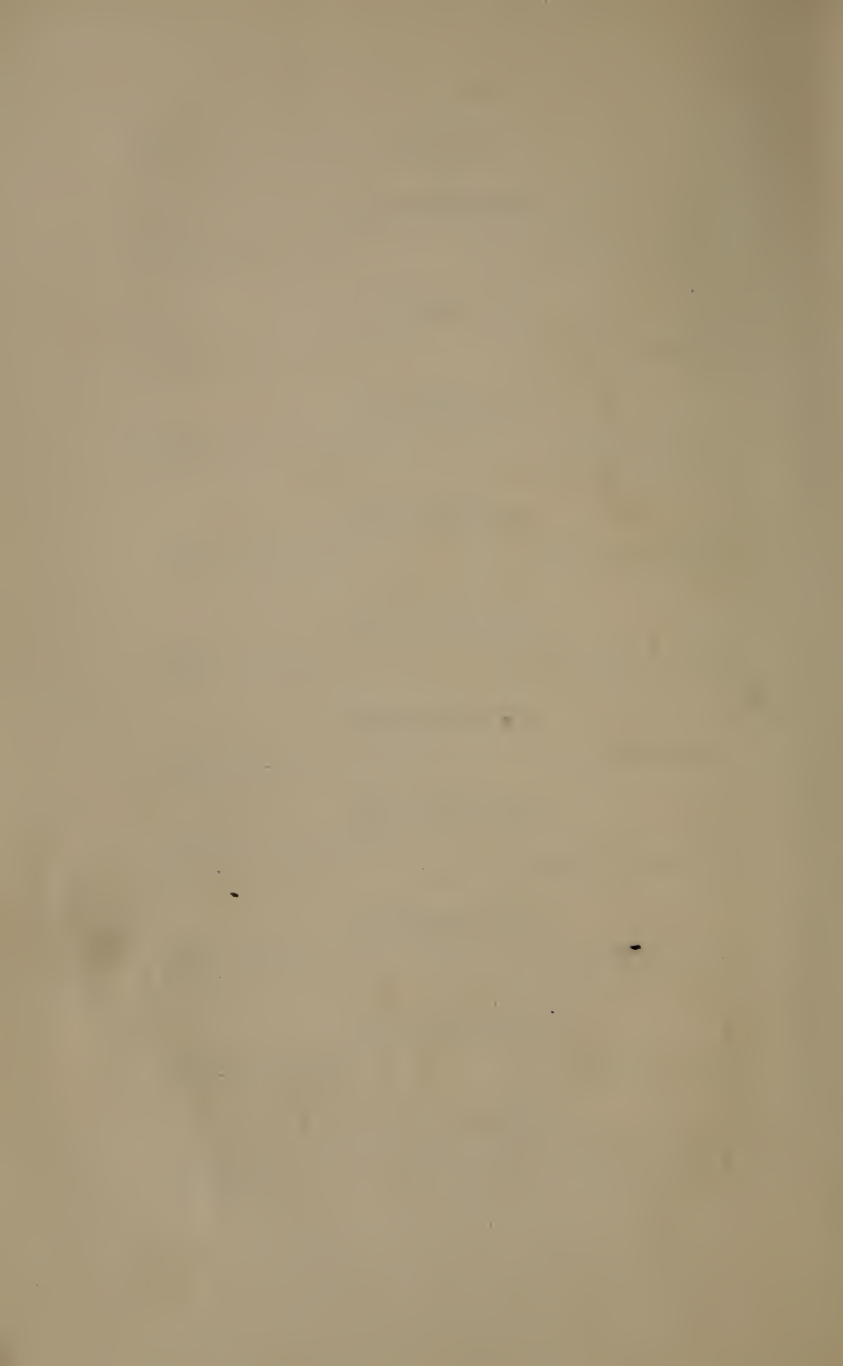
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G W E N W Y N N :

A Romance of the Alps.

CHAPTER I.

A TARDY MESSENGER.

FATHER ROGIER has arrived at Abergann ; slipped off his goloshes, left them with his hat in the entrance passage ; and stepped inside the parlour.

There is a bright coal fire chirping in the grate ; for, although not absolutely cold, the air is damp and raw from the rain which has fallen during the earlier hours of the day. He has not come direct from his house at the Ferry, but up the meadows from below, along paths that are muddy, with wet grass overhanging. Hence his

having on india-rubber overshoes. Spare of flesh, and thin-blooded, he is sensitive to cold.

Feeling it now, he draws a chair to the fire, and sits down with his feet rested on the fender.

For a time he has it all to himself. The farmer is still outside, looking after his cattle, and setting things up for the night ; while Mrs. Morgan, after receiving him, has made excuse to the kitchen—to set the frying-pan on the coals. Already the sausages can be heard frizzling, while their savoury odour is borne everywhere throughout the house.

Before sitting down the priest had helped himself to a glass of sherry ; and, after taking a mouthful or two, set it on the mantelshelf, within convenient reach. It would have been brandy were there any on the table ; but, for the time satisfied with the wine, he sits sipping it, his eyes now and then directed towards the door. This is shut, Mrs. Morgan having closed it after her as she went out.

There is a certain restlessness in his glances, as though he were impatient for the door to be reopened, and some one to enter.

And so is he, though Mrs. Morgan herself is not the same one—but her daughter. Gregoire Rogier has been a fast fellow in his youth—before assuming the cassock a very *mauvais sujet*. Even now in the maturer age, and despite his vows of celibacy, he has a partiality for the sex, and a keen eye to female beauty. The fresh, youthful charms of the farmer's daughter have many a time made it water, more than the now stale attractions of Olympe, *née* Renault. She is not the only disciple of his flock he delights in drawing to the confessional.

But there is a vast difference between the mistress of Glyngog and the maiden of Abergann. Unlike are they as Lucrezia Borgia to that other Lucretia—victim of Tarquin *filis*. And the priest knows he must deal with them in a very different manner. He cannot himself have Mary

Morgan for a wife—he does not wish to—but it may serve his purpose equally well were she to become the wife of Richard Dempsey. Hence his giving support to the pretensions of the poacher—not all unselfish.

Eagerly watching the door, he at length sees it pushed open; and by a woman, but not the one he is wishing for. Only Mrs. Morgan re-entering to speak apologies for delay in serving supper. It will be on the table in a trice.

Without paying much attention to what she says, or giving thought to her excuses, he asks in a drawl of assumed indifference,

“Where is Ma’m selle Marie? Not on the sick list, I hope?”

“Oh no, your reverence. She was never in better health in her life, I’m happy to say.”

“Attending to culinary matters, I presume? Bothering herself—on my account, too! Really, madame, I wish you wouldn’t take so much trouble when I come to pay you these little visits—calls of duty. Above

all, that ma'mselle should be scorching her fair cheeks before a kitchen fire."

"She's not—nothing of the kind, Father Rogier."

"Dressing, may be? That isn't needed either—to receive poor me."

"No; she's not dressing."

"Ah! What then? Pardon me for appearing inquisitive. I merely wish to have a word with her before monsieur, your husband, comes in—relating to a matter of the Sunday school. She's at home, isn't she?"

"Not just this minute. She soon will be."

"What! Out at this hour?"

"Yes; she has gone up to the Ferry on an errand. I wonder you didn't meet her! Which way did you come, Father Rogier—the path or the lane?"

"Neither—nor from the Ferry. I've been down the river on visitation duty, and came up through the meadows. It's rather a dark night for your daughter to have gone upon an errand! Not alone, I take it?"

"Yes ; she went alone."

"But why, madame ?"

Mrs. Morgan had not intended to say anything about the nature of the message, but it must come out now.

"Well, your reverence," she answers, laughing, "it's rather an amusing matter—as you'll say yourself, when I tell it you."

"Tell it, pray !"

"It's all through a cat—our big Tom."

"Ah, Tom ! What *jeu d'esprit* has he been perpetrating ?"

"Not much of a joke, after all ; but more the other way. The mischievous creature got into the pantry, and somehow upset a bottle—indeed, broke it to pieces."

"*Chat maudit !* But what has that to do with your daughter's going to the Ferry ?"

"Everything. It was a bottle of best French brandy—unfortunately the only one we had in the house. And as they say misfortunes never do come single, it so happened our boy was away after the cows, and nobody else I could spare. So I've sent Mary to the Welsh Harp for another.

I know your reverence prefers brandy to wine."

"Madame, your very kind thoughtfulness deserves my warmest thanks. But I'm really sorry at your having taken all this trouble to entertain me. Above all, I regret its having entailed such a disagreeable duty upon your Mademoiselle Marie. Henceforth I shall feel reluctance in setting foot over your threshold."

"Don't say that, Father Rogier. Please don't. Mary didn't think it disagreeable. I should have been angry with her if she had. On the contrary, it was herself proposed going; as the boy was out of the way, and our girl in the kitchen, busy about supper. But poor it is—I'm sorry to tell you—and will need the drop of Cognac to make it at all palatable.

"You underrate your *menu*, madame; if it be anything like what I've been accustomed to at your table. Still, I cannot help feeling regret at ma'mselle's having been sent to the Ferry—the roads in such condition. And so dark, too—she may

have a difficulty in finding her way. Which did she go by—the path or the lane? Your own interrogatory to myself—almost verbatim—*c'est drole!*”

With but a vague comprehension of the interpolated French and Latin phrases, the farmer's wife makes rejoinder:

“Indeed, I can't say which. I never thought of asking her. However, Mary's a sensible lass, and surely wouldn't think of venturing over the foot plank a night like this. She knows it's loose. Ah!” she continues, stepping to the window, and looking out, “there be the moon up! I'm glad of that; she'll see her way now, and get sooner home.”

“How long is it since she went off?”

Mrs. Morgan glances at the clock over the mantel; soon she sees where the hands are, exclaiming:

“Mercy me! It's half-past nine! She's been gone a good hour!”

Her surprise is natural. To Rugg's Ferry is but a mile, even by the lane and road. Twenty minutes to go and twenty

more to return were enough. How are the other twenty being spent? Buying a bottle of brandy across the counter, and paying for it, will not explain; that should occupy scarce as many seconds. Besides, the last words of the messenger, at starting off, were a promise of speedy return. She has not kept it! And what can be keeping *her*?

Her mother asks this question, but without being able to answer it. She can neither tell nor guess. But the priest, more suspicious, has his conjectures; one giving him pain—greatly exciting him, though he does not show it. Instead, with simulated calmness, he says:

“Suppose I step out and see whether she be near at hand?”

“If your reverence would. But please don’t stay for her. Supper’s quite ready, and Evan will be in by the time I get it dished. I wonder what’s detaining Mary!”

If she only knew what, she would be less solicitous about the supper, and more about the absent one.

“No matter,” she continues, cheering up, “the girl will surely be back before we sit down to the table. If not, she must go——”

The priest had not stayed to hear the clause threatening to disentitle the tardy messenger. He is too anxious to learn the cause of delay; and, in the hope of discovering it, with a view to something besides, he hastily claps on his hat—without waiting to defend his feet with the goloshes—then glides out and off across the garden.

Mrs. Morgan remains in the doorway looking after him, with an expression on her face not all contented. Perhaps she too, has a foreboding of evil; or, it may be, she but thinks of her daughter's future, and that she is herself doing wrong by endeavouring to influence it in favour of a man about whom she has of late heard discreditable rumours. Or, perchance, some suspicion of the priest himself may be stirring within her: for there are scandals abroad concerning him, that have reached

even her ears. Whatever the cause, there is shadow on her brow, as she watches him pass out through the gate; scarce dispelled by the bright blazing fire in the kitchen, as she returns thither to direct the serving of the supper.

If she but knew the tale he, Father Rogier, is so soon to bring back, she might not have left the door so soon, or upon her own feet; more likely have dropped down on its threshold, to be carried from it fainting, if not dead!

CHAPTER II.

A FATAL STEP.

HAVING passed out through the gate, Rogier turns along the wall ; and, proceeding at a brisk pace to where it ends in an angle, there comes to a halt.

On the same spot where about an hour before stopped Mary Morgan—for a different reason. She paused to consider which of the two ways she would take ; he has no intention of taking either, or going a step farther. Whatever he wishes to say to her can be said where he now is, without danger of its being overheard at the house—unless spoken in a tone louder than that of ordinary conversation. But it is not on this account he has stopped ; simply that he is not sure which of the two routes she will return by—and for him to proceed

along either would be to risk the chance of not meeting her at all.

But that he has some idea of the way she will come, with suspicion of why and what is delaying her, his mutterings tell :

“*Morbleu!* over an hour since she set out! A tortoise could have crawled to the Ferry, and crept back within the time! For a demoiselle with limbs lithe and supple as hers—pah! It can’t be the brandy bottle that’s the obstruction. Nothing of the kind. Corked, capsuled, wrapped, ready for delivery—in all two minutes, or at most, three! She so ready to run for it, too—herself proposed going! Odd, that to say the least. Only understandable on the supposition of something prearranged. An assignation with the River Triton for sure! Yes; he’s the anchor that’s been holding her—holds her still. Likely, they’re somewhat under the shadow of that wood, now—standing—sitting—ach! I wish I but knew the spot; I’d bring their billing and cooing to an abrupt termination. It will not do for me

to go on guesses ; I might miss the straying damsel with whom this night I want a word in particular—must have it. Monsieur Coracle may need binding a little faster, before he consents to the service required of him. To ensure an interview with her it is necessary to stay on this spot, however trying to patience.

For a second or two he stands motionless, though all the while active in thought, his eyes also restless. These, turning to the wall, show him that it is overgrown with ivy. A massive cluster on its crest projects out, with hanging tendrils, whose tops almost touch the ground. Behind them there is ample room for a man to stand upright, and so be concealed from the eyes of anyone passing, however near.

“ *Grace à Dieu !* ” he exclaims, observing this ; “ the very place. I must take her by surprise. That’s the best way when one wants to learn how the cat jumps. Ha ! *cette chat* Tom ; how very opportune ! his mischievous doings — for Mademoiselle ! Well, I must give *Madame la mère* counsel

better to guard against such accidents hereafter; and how to behave when they occur."

He has by this ducked his head, and stepped under the arcading evergreen.

The position is all he could desire. It gives him a view of both ways by which on that side the farmhouse can be approached. The cart lane is directly before his face, as is also the footpath when he turns towards it. The latter leading, as already said, along a hedge to the orchard's bottom, there crosses the brook by a plank—this being about fifty yards distant from where he has stationed himself. And as there is now moonlight he can distinctly see the frail footbridge, with a portion of the path beyond, where it runs through straggling trees, before entering the thicker wood. Only at intervals has he sight of it, as the sky is mottled with masses of cloud, that every now and then, drifting over the moon's disc, shut off her light with the suddenness of a lamp extinguished.

When she shines he can himself be seen.

Standing in crouched attitude with the ivy tendrils festooned over his pale, bloodless face, he looks like a gigantic spider behind its web, on the wait for prey—ready to spring forward and seize it.

For nigh ten minutes he thus remains watching, all the while impatiently chafing. He listens too; though with little hope of hearing aught to indicate the approach of her expected. After the pleasant *tête-à-tête*, he is now sure she must have held with the waterman, she will be coming along silently, her thoughts in sweet, placid contentment; or she may come on with timid, stealthy steps, dreading rebuke by her mother for having overstayed her time.

Just as the priest in bitterest chagrin is promising himself that rebuked she shall be he sees what interrupts his resolves, suddenly and altogether withdrawing his thoughts from Mary Morgan. It is a form approaching the plank, on the opposite side of the stream; not hers, nor woman's; instead the figure of a man! Neither erect

nor walking in the ordinary way, but with head held down and shoulders projected forward, as if he were seeking concealment under the bushes that beset the path, for all drawing nigh to the brook with the rapidity of one pursued, and who thinks there is safety only on its other side!

“*Sainte Vierge !*” exclaims the priest, *sotto voce*. “What can all that mean? And who——”

He stays his self-asked interrogatory, seeing that the skulker has paused too—at the farther end of the plank, which he has now reached. Why? It may be from fear to set foot on it; for indeed is there danger to one not intimately acquainted with it. The man may be a stranger—some fellow on teamo who intends trying the hospitality of the farmhouse—more likely its henroosts, judging by his manner of approach?

While thus conjecturing, Rogier sees the skulker stoop down, immediately after hearing a sound, different from the sough of the stream; a harsh grating noise, as of a

piece of heavy timber drawn over a rough surface of rock.

“Sharp fellow?” thinks the priest; “with all his haste, wonderfully cautious! He’s fixing the thing steady before venturing to tread upon it! Ha! I’m wrong; he don’t design crossing it after all!”

This as the crouching figure erects itself and, instead of passing over the plank, turns abruptly away from it. Not to go back along the path, but up the stream on that same side! And with bent body as before, still seeming desirous to shun observation.

Now more than ever mystified, the priest watches him, with eyes keen as those of a cat set for nocturnal prowling. Not long till he learns who the man is. Just then the moon, escaping from a cloud, flashes her full light in his face, revealing features of diabolic expression—that of a murderer striding away from the spot where he has been spilling blood!

Rogier recognizes Coracle Dick, though

still without the slightest idea of what the poacher is doing there.

“*Que diantre !*” he exclaims, in surprise ; “what can that devil be after ! Coming up to the plank and not crossing—Ha ! yonder’s a very different sort of pedestrian approaching it ? Ma’m selle Mary at last !”

This as by the same intermittent gleam of moonlight he descries a straw hat, with streaming ribbons, over the tops of the bushes beyond the brook.

The brighter image drives the darker one from his thoughts ; and, forgetting all about the man, in his resolve to take the woman un-awares, he steps out from under the ivy, and makes forward to meet her. He is a Frenchman, and to help her over the footplank will give him a fine opportunity for displaying his cheap gallantry.

As he hastens down to the stream, the moon remaining unclouded, he sees the young girl close to it on the opposite side. She approaches with proud carriage, and confident step, her cheeks even under the pale light showing red—flushed with the

kisses so lately received, as it were still clinging to them. Her heart yet thrilling with love, strong under its excitement, little suspects she how soon it will cease to beat.

Boldly she plants her foot upon the plank, believing, late boasting, a knowledge of its tricks. Alas! there is one with which she is not acquainted—could not be—a new and treacherous one, taught it within the last two minutes. The daughter of Evan Morgan is doomed; one more step will be her last in life!

She makes it, the priest alone being witness. He sees her arms flung aloft, simultaneously hearing a shriek; then arms, body, and bridge sink out of sight suddenly, as though the earth had swallowed them!

CHAPTER III.

A SUSPICIOUS WAIF.

ON returning homeward the young waterman bethinks him of a difficulty—a little matter to be settled with his mother. Not having gone to the shop, he has neither whipcord nor pitch to show. If questioned about these commodities, what answer is he to make? He dislikes telling her another lie. It came easy enough before the interview with his sweetheart, but now it is not so much worth while.

On reflection he thinks it will be better to make a clean breast of it. He has already half confessed, and may as well admit his mother to full confidence about the secret he has been trying to keep from her—unsuccessfully, as he now knows.

While still undetermined, a circumstance occurs to hinder him from longer withhold-

ing it, whether he would or not. In his abstraction he has forgotten all about the moon, now up, and at intervals shining brightly. During one of these he has arrived at his own gate, as he opens it seeing his mother on the door-step. Her attitude shows she has already seen him, and observed the direction whence he has come. Her words declare the same.

“Why, Jack!” she exclaims, in feigned astonishment, “ye beant a comin’ from the Ferry that way?”

The interrogatory, or rather the tone in which it is put, tells him the cat is out of the bag. No use attempting to stuff the animal in again; and seeing it is not, he rejoins, laughingly—

“Well, mother, to speak the truth, I ha’nt been to the Ferry at all. An’ I must ask you to forgie me for practisin’ a trifle o’ deception on ye—that ’bout the *Mary* wantin’ repairs.”

“I suspected it, lad; an’ that it wor the tother *Mary* as wanted something, or you wanted something wi’ her. Since you’ve

spoke repentful, an' confessed, I ain't agoin to worrit ye about it. I'm glad the boat be all right, as I ha' got good news for you."

"What?" he asks, rejoiced at being so easily let off.

"Well; you spoke truth when ye sayed there was no knowin' but that somebody might be wantin' to hire ye any minnit. There's been one arready."

"Who? Not the Captain?"

"No, not him. But a grand livery chap; footman or coachman—I ain't sure which—only that he came frae a Squire Powell's, 'bout a mile back."

"Oh! I know Squire Powell—him o' New Hall, I suppose it be. What did the sarvint say?"

"That if you wasn't engaged, his young master wants ye to take hisself, and some friends that be staying wi' him, for a row down the river."

"How far did the man say? If they be bound to Chepstow or even but Tintern, I don't think I could go; unless they start Monday mornin'. I'm 'gaged to the

Captain for Thursday, ye know; an' if I went the long trip, there'd be all the bother o' gettin' the boat back—an' bare time."

"Monday! Why, it's the morrow they want ye."

"Sunday! That's queerish, too. Squire Powell's family be a sort o' strict religious, I've heerd."

"That's just it. The livery chap sayed it be a church they're goin' to; some curious kind o' old worshippin' place, that lie in a bend o' the river, where carriages ha' difficulty in gettin' to it."

"I think I know the one, an' can take them there well enough. What answer did you gie to the man?"

"That ye could take 'em, an' would. I know'd you hadn't any other bespeak; and since it wor to a church wouldn't mind its bein' Sunday."

"Sartinly not. Why should I?" asks Jack, who is anything but a Sabbatarian. "Where do they weesh the boat to be took? Or am I to wait for 'em here?"

“Yes; the man spoke o’ them comin’ here, an’ at a very early hour. Six o’clock. He sayed the clergyman be a friend o’ the family, and they’re to ha’ their breakfasts wi’ him, afore goin’ to church.”

“All right! I’ll be ready for ’em, come’s as early as they may.”

“In that case, my son; ye’ better get to your bed at once. Ye’ve had a hard day o’ it, and need rest. Should ye like take a drop o’ somethin’ ’fores you lie down?”

“Well, mother; I don’t mind. Just a glass o’ your elderbery.”

She opens a cupboard, brings forth a black bottle, and fills him a tumbler of the dark red wine—home made, and by her own hands.

Quaffing it, he observes:—

“It be the best stuff I know of to put spirit into a man, an’ makes him feel cheery. I’ve heerd the Captain hisself say, it beats their *Spanish Port* all to pieces.”

Though somewhat astray in his commercial geography, the young waterman, as

his patron, is right about the quality of the beverage ; for elderberry wine, made in the correct way, *is* superior to that of Oporto. Curious scientific fact, I believe not generally known, that the soil where grows the *Sambucus* is that most favourable to the growth of the grape.

Without going thus deeply into the philosophy of the subject, or at all troubling himself about it, the boatman soon gets to the bottom of his glass, and bidding his mother good night, retires to his sleeping room.

Getting into bed, he lies for a while sweetly thinking of Mary Morgan, and that satisfactory interview under the elm ; then goes to sleep as sweetly to dream of her.

* * * * *

There is just a streak of daylight stealing in through the window as he awakes; enough to warn him that it is time to be up and stirring. Up he instantly is and arrays himself, not in his everyday boating habiliments, but a suit worn only on Sundays and holidays. .

The mother, also astir betimes, has his breakfast on the table soon as he is rigged; and just as he finishes eating it, the rattle of wheels on the road in front, with voices, tells him his fare has arrived.

Hastening out, he sees a grand carriage drawn up at the gate, double horsed, with coachman and footman on the box; inside young Mr. Powell, his pretty sister, and two others—a lady and gentleman, also young.

Soon they are all seated in the boat, the coachman having been ordered to take the carriage home, and bring it back at a certain hour. The footman goes with them—the *Mary* having seats for six.

Rowed down stream, the young people converse among themselves; gaily, now and then giving way to laughter, as though it were any other day than Sunday. But their boatman is merry also, with memories of the preceding night; and, though not called upon to take part in their conversation, he likes listening to it. Above all he is pleased with the appearance of Miss

Powell, a very beautiful girl; and takes note of the attention paid her by the gentleman who sits opposite. Jack is rather interested in observing these, as they remind him of his own first approaches to Mary Morgan.

His eyes, though, are for a time removed from them, while the boat is passing Abergann. Out of the farmhouse chimneys just visible over the tops of the trees, he sees smoke ascending. It is not yet seven o'clock, but the Morgans are early risers, and by this mother and daughter will be on their way to *Matins*, and possibly Confession at the Rugg's Ferry Chapel. He dislikes to reflect on the last, and longs for the day when he has hopes to cure his sweetheart of such a repulsive devotional practice.

Pulling on down he ceases to think of it, and of her for the time, his attention being engrossed by the management of the boat. For just below Abergann the stream runs sharply, and is given to caprices. But further on, it once more flows in gentle

tide along the meadow lands of Llangorren.

Before turning the bend, where Gwen Wynn and Eleanor Lees were caught in the rapid current, at the estuary of a sluggish inflowing brook, whose waters are now beaten back by the flooded river, he sees what causes him to start, and hang on the stroke of his oar.

“What is it, Wingate?” asks young Powell, observing his strange behaviour. “Oh! a waif—that plank floating yonder! I suppose you’d like to pick it up! But remember! it’s Sunday, and we must confine ourselves to works of necessity and mercy.”

Little think the four who smile at this remark—five with the footman—what a weird, painful impression the sight of that drifting thing has made on the sixth who is rowing them.

Nor does it leave him all that day; but clings to him in the church, to which he goes; at the Rectory, where he is entertained; and while rowing back up the

river — hangs heavy on his heart as lead !

Returning, he looks out for the piece of timber ; but cannot see it ; for it is now after night, the young people having stayed dinner with their friend the clergyman.

Kept later than they intended, on arrival at the boat's dock they do not remain there an instant ; but, getting into the carriage, which has been some time awaiting them, are whirled off to New Hall.

Impatient are they to be home. Far more — for a different reason — the waterman ; who but stays to tie the boat's painter ; and, leaving the oars in her thwarts, hastens into his house. The plank is still uppermost in his thoughts, the presentiment heavy on his heart.

Not lighter, as on entering at the door he sees his mother seated with her head bowed down to her knees.

He does not wait for her to speak, but asks excitedly :—

“ What's the matter, mother ? ”

The question is mechanical—he almost anticipates the answer, or its nature.

“Oh, my son, my son! As I told ye. It *was the canwyll corph!*”

CHAPTER IV.

“THE FLOWER OF LOVE-LIES-BLEEDING.”

THERE is a crowd collected round the farmhouse of Abergann. Not an excited, or noisy one; instead, the people composing it are of staid demeanour, with that formal solemnity observable on the faces of those at a funeral.

And a funeral it is, or soon to be. For, inside there is a chamber of death; a coffin with a corpse—that of her, who, had she lived, would have been Jack Wingate’s wife.

Mary Morgan has indeed fallen victim to the mad spite of a monster. Down went she into that swollen stream, which, ruthless and cruel as he who committed her to it, carried her off on its engulfing tide—her form tossed to and fro, now sinking, now coming to the surface, and again going

down. No one to save her—not an effort at rescue made by the cowardly Frenchman ; who, rushing on to the chasm’s edge, there stopped—only to gaze affrightedly at the flood surging below, foam crested ; only to listen to her agonized cry, further off and more freely put forth, as she was borne onward to her doom.

Once again he heard it, in that tone which tells of life’s last struggle with death—proclaiming death the conqueror. Then all was over. As he stood horror-stricken, half-bewildered, a cloud suddenly curtained the moon, bringing black darkness upon the earth, as if a pall had been thrown over it. Even the white froth on the water was for the while invisible. He could see nothing—nothing hear, save the hoarse, harsh torrent rolling relentlessly on. Of no avail, then, his hurrying back to the house, and raising the alarm. Too late it was to save Mary Morgan from drowning ; and, only by the accident of her body being thrown up against a bank was it that night recovered.

It is the third day after, and the funeral

about to take place. Though remote the situation of the farm-stead, and sparsely inhabited the district immediately around, the assemblage is a large one. This partly from the unusual circumstances of the girl's death, but as much from the respect in which Evan Morgan is held by his neighbours, far and near. They are there in their best attire, men and women alike, Protestants as Catholics, to show a sympathy, which in truth many of them sincerely feel.

Nor is there among the people assembled any conjecturing about the cause of the fatal occurrence. No hint, or suspicion, that there has been foul play. How could there? So clearly an accident, as pronounced by the coroner at his inquiry held the day after the drowning—brief and purely *pro forma*.

Mrs. Morgan herself told of her daughter sent on that errand from which she never returned; while the priest, eye-witness, stated the reason why. Taken together, this was enough; though further confirmed by the absent plank, found and brought back on the following day. Even had Wingate

rowed back up the river during daylight, he would not have seen it again. The farm labourers and others, accustomed to cross by it, gave testimony as to its having been loose.

But of all whose evidence was called for, one alone could have put a different construction on the tale. Father Rogier could have done this; but did not, having his reasons for withholding the truth. He is now in possession of a secret that will make Richard Dempsey his slave for life—his instrument, willing or unwilling, for such purpose as he may need him, no matter what its iniquity.

The hour of interment has been fixed for twelve o'clock. It is now a little after eleven, and everybody has arrived at the house. The men stand outside in groups, some in the little flower garden in front, others straying into the farmyard to have a look at the fatting pigs, or about the pastures to view the white-faced Herefords and “Rye-land” sheep; of which last Evan Morgan is a noted breeder.

Inside the house are the women—some

relatives of the deceased, with the farmer's friends and more familiar acquaintances. All admitted to the chamber of death to take a last look at the dead. The corpse is in the coffin, but with lid not yet screwed on. There lies the corpse in its white drapery, still untouched by "decay's effacing fingers," beautiful as living bride, though now a bride for the altar of eternity.

The stream passes in and out; but besides those only curious coming and going, there are some who remain in the room. Mrs. Morgan herself sits beside the coffin, at intervals giving way to wildest grief; a cluster of women around vainly essaying to comfort her.

There is a young man seated in the corner, who seems to need consoling almost as much as she. Every now and then his breast heaves in audible sobbing as though the heart within were about to break. None wonder at this; for it is Jack Wingate.

Still, there are those who think it strange his being there—above all, as if made wel-

come. They know not the remarkable change that has taken place in the feelings of Mrs. Morgan. Beside that bed of death all who were dear to her daughter, were dear to her now. And she is aware that the young waterman was so. For he has told her, with tearful eyes and sad, earnest words, whose truthfulness could not be doubted.

But where is the other, the false one? Not there—never has been since the fatal occurrence. Came not to the inquest, came not to inquire or condole; comes not now to show sympathy, or take part in the rites of sepulture.

There are some who make remark about his absence, though none lament it—not even Mrs. Morgan herself. The thought of the bereaved mother is that he would have ill-befitted being her son. Only a fleeting reflection, her whole soul being engrossed in grief for her lost daughter.

The hour for closing the coffin has come. They but await the priest to say some solemn words. He has not yet arrived,

though every instant looked for. A personage so important has many duties to perform, and may be detained by them elsewhere.

For all, he does not fail. While inside the death chamber they are conjecturing the cause of his delay, a buzz outside, with a shuffling of feet in the passage, tells of way being made for him.

Presently he enters the room, and stepping up to the coffin stands beside it, all eyes turned towards him. His are upon the face of the corpse—at first with the usual look of official gravity and feigned grief. But continuing to gaze upon it, a strange expression comes over his features, as though he saw something that surprised, or unusually interested him. It affects him even to giving a start; so light, however, that no one seems to observe it. Whatever the emotion, he conceals it; and in calm voice pronounces the prayer, with all its formalities and gestures.

The lid is laid on, covering the form of Mary Morgan—for ever veiling her face

from the world. Then the pall is thrown over, and all carried outside.

There is no hearse, no plumes, nor paid pall-bearers. Affection supplies the place of this heartless luxury of the tomb. On the shoulders of four men the coffin is borne away, the crowd forming into procession as it passes, and following.

On to the Rugg's Ferry chapel,—into its cemetery, late consecrated. There lowered into a grave already prepared to receive it; and, after the usual ceremonial of the Roman Catholic religion covered up, and turfed over.

Then the mourners scatter off for their homes, singly or in groups, leaving the remains of Mary Morgan in their last resting place, only her near relatives with thought of ever again returning to stand over them.

There is one exception; this is a man not related to her, but who would have been had she lived. Wingate goes away with the intention ere long to return. The chapel burying ground brinks upon the

river, and when the shades of night have descended over it, he brings his boat alongside. Then, fixing her to the bank, he steps out, and proceeds in the direction of the new made grave. All this cautiously, and with circumspection, as if fearing to be seen. The darkness favouring him, he is not.

Reaching the sacred spot he kneels down, and with a knife, taken from his pockets, scoops out a little cavity in the lately laid turf. Into this he inserts a plant, which he has brought along with him—one of a common kind, but emblematic of no ordinary feeling. It is that known to country people as “The Flower of Love-lies-bleeding” (*Amaranthus caudatus*).

Closing the earth around its roots, and restoring the sods, he bends lower, till his lips are in contact with the grass upon the grave. One near enough might hear convulsive sobbing, accompanied by the words:—

“Mary, darling! you’re wi’ the angels now; and I know you’ll forgie me, if I’ve

done ought to bring about this dreadful thing. Oh, dear, dear Mary! I'd be only too glad to be lyin' in the grave along wi' ye. As God's my witness I would."

For a time he is silent, giving way to his grief—so wild as to seem unbearable. And just for an instant he himself thinks it so, as he kneels with the knife still open in his hand, his eyes fixed upon it. A plunge with that shining blade with point to his heart, and all his misery would be over!

"My mother—my poor mother—no!"

These few words, with the filial thought conveyed, save him from suicide. Soon as repeating them, he shuts to his knife, rises to his feet, and returning to the boat again rows himself home—but never with so heavy a heart.

CHAPTER V.

A FRENCH FEMME DE CHAMBRE.

OF all who assisted at the ceremony of Mary Morgan's funeral, no one seemed so impatient for its termination as the priest. In his official capacity he did all he could to hasten it; soon as it was over hurrying away from the grave, out of the burying ground, and into his own house, near by.

Such haste would have appeared strange—even indecent—but for the belief of his having some sacerdotal duty that called him elsewhere; a belief strengthened by their shortly after seeing him start off in the direction of the Ferry boat.

Arriving there, the Charon attendant rows him across the river; and, soon as setting foot on the opposite side, he turns face down stream, taking a path that meanders through fields and meadows. Along

this he goes rapidly as his legs can carry him—in a walk. Clerical dignity hinders him from proceeding at a run, though judging by the expression of his countenance he is inclined to it.

The route he is on would conduct to Llangorren Court—several miles distant—and thither is he bound; though the house itself is not his objective point. He does not visit, nor would it serve him to show his face there—least of all to Gwen Wynn. She might not be so rude as to use her riding whip on him, as she once felt inclined in the hunting-field; but she would certainly be surprised to see him at her home.

Yet it is one within her house he wishes to see, and is now on the way for it, pretty sure of being able to accomplish his object. True to her fashionable instincts and *toilette* necessities, Miss Linton keeps a French maid, and it is with this damsel Father Rogier designs having an interview. He is thoroughly *en rapport* with the *femme de chambre* and through her, aided by the

Confession, kept advised of everything which transpires at the Court, or all he deems it worth while to be advised about.

His confidence that he will not have long his walk for nothing rests on certain matters of pre-arrangement. With the foreign domestic he has succeeded in establishing a code of signals, by which he can communicate—with almost a certainty of being able to see her. Not inside the house, but at a place near enough to be convenient. Rare the park in Herefordshire through which there is not a right-of-way path, and one runs across that of Llangorren. Not through the ornamental grounds, nor at all close to the mansion—as is frequently the case, to the great chagrin of the owner—but several hundred yards distant. It passes from the river's bank to the county road, all the way through trees, that screen it from view of the house. There is a point, however, where it approaches the edge of the wood, and there one traversing it might be seen from the upper windows. But only for an instant, unless the party so

passing should choose to make stop in the place exposed.

It is a thoroughfare not much frequented, though free to Father Rogier as any one else; and, now hastening along it, he arrives at that spot where the break in the timber brings the house in view. Here he makes a halt, still keeping under the trees; to a branch of one of them, on the side towards the Court attaching a piece of white paper, he has taken out of his pocket. This done with due caution, and care that he be not observed in the act, he draws back to the path, and sits down upon a stile close by—to await the upshot of his telegraphy.

His haste hitherto explained by the fact, only at certain times are his signals likely to be seen, or could they be attended to. One of the surest and safest is during the early afternoon hours, just after luncheon, when the ancient toast of Cheltenham takes her accustomed *siesta*—before dressing herself for the drive, or reception of callers. While the mistress sleeps the

maid is free to dispose of herself, as she pleases.

It was to hit this interlude of leisure Father Rogier has been hurrying; and that he has succeeded is soon known to him, by his seeing a form with floating drapery, recognizable as that of the *femme de chambre*. Gliding through the shrubbery, and evidently with an eye to escape observation, she is only visible at intervals; at length lost to his sight altogether as she enters among the thick standing trees. But he knows she will turn up again.

And she does, after a short time; coming along the path towards the stile where here he is seated.

“Ah! *ma bonne!*” he exclaims, dropping on his feet, and moving forward to meet her. “You’ve been prompt! I didn’t expect you quite so soon. Madame la Chatelaine oblivious, I apprehend; in the midst of her afternoon nap?”

“Yes, Père; she was when I stole off. But she has given me directions about dressing her, to go out for a drive—earlier

than usual. So I must get back immediately."

"I'm not going to detain you very long. I chanced to be passing, and thought I might as well have a word with you—seeing it's the hour when you're off duty. By the way, I hear you're about to have grand doings at the Court—a ball, and what not?"

"*Oui, m'ssieu; oui.*"

"When is it to be?"

"On Thursday. Mademoiselle celebrates *son jour de naissance*—the twenty-first, making her of age. It is to be a grand fête as you say. They've been all last week preparing for it."

"Among the invited Le Capitaine Rye-croft, I presume?"

"O yes. I saw madame write the note inviting him—indeed took it myself down to the hall table for the post-boy."

"He visits often at the Court of late?"

"Very often—once a week, sometimes twice."

“ And comes down the river by boat ; doesn't he ! ”

“ In a boat. Yes—comes and goes that way.”

Her statement is reliable, as Father Rogier has reason to believe—having an inkling of suspicion that the damsel has of late been casting sheep's eyes, not at Captain Ryecroft, but his young boatman, and is as much interested in the movements of the *Mary* as either the boat's owner or charterer.

“ Always comes by water, and returns by it,” observes the priest, as if speaking to himself. “ You're quite sure of that, *ma fille* ? ”

“ Oh, quite, Père ! ”

“ Mademoiselle appears to be very partial to him. I think, you told me she often accompanies him down to the boat stair, at his departure ? ”

“ Often ! always.”

“ Always ? ”

“ *Toujours* ! I never knew it otherwise. Either the boat stair, or the pavilion.”

“ Ah ! the summer-house ! They hold their *tête-à-tête* there at times ; do they ? ”

“ Yes ; they do.”

“ But not when he leaves at a late hour—as, for instance, when he dines at the Court ; which I know he has done several times ? ”

“ Oh, yes ; even then. Only last week he was there for dinner ; and Ma'mselle Gwen went with him to his boat, or the pavilion—to bid adieus. No matter what the time to her. *Ma foi !* I'd risk my word she'll do the same after this grand ball that's to be. And why shouldn't she, Père Rogier ? Is there any harm in it ? ”

The question is put with a view of justifying her own conduct, that would be somewhat similar were Jack Wingate to encourage it, which, to say truth, he never has.

“ Oh, no,” answers the priest, with an assumed indifference ; “ no harm, whatever, and no business of ours. Mademoiselle Wynn is mistress of her own actions, and will be more, after the coming birthday

number *vingt-un*. But," he adds, dropping the rôle of the interrogator, now that he has got all the information wanted, "I fear I'm keeping you too long. As I've said, chancing to come by I signalled—chiefly to tell you, that next Sunday we have High Mass in the chapel. With special prayers for a young girl, who was drowned last Saturday night, and whom we've just this day interred. I suppose you've heard?"

"No, I haven't. Who Père?"

Her question may appear strange, Rugg's Ferry being so near to Llangorren Court and Abergann still nearer. But for reasons already stated, as others, the ignorance of the Frenchwoman as to what has occurred at the farmhouse, is not only intelligible, but natural enough.

Equally natural, though in a sense very different, is the look of satisfaction appearing in her eyes, as the priest in answer gives the name of the drowned girl.

"*Marie, la fille de fermier Morgan.*"

The expression that comes over her face is, under the circumstances, terribly repul-

sive—being almost that of joy! For not only has she seen Mary Morgan at the chapel, but something besides—heard her name coupled with that of the waterman, Wingate.

In the midst of her strong, sinful emotions, of which the priest is fully cognizant, he finds it a good opportunity for taking leave. Going back to the tree where the bit of signal paper has been left, he plucks it off, and crumbles it into his pocket. Then, returning to the path, shakes hands with her, says "*Bon jour!*" and departs.

She is not a beauty, or he would have made his adieus in a very different way.

CHAPTER VI.

THE POACHER AT HOME.

CORACLE DICK lives all alone. If he have relatives they are not near, nor does any one in the neighbourhood know aught about them. Only some vague report of a father away off in the colonies, where he went against his will; while the mother—is believed dead.

Not less solitary is Coracle's place of abode. Situated in a dingle with sides thickly wooded, it is not visible from anywhere. Nor is it near any regular road; only approachable by a path, which there ends; the dell itself being a *cul-de-sac*. Its open end is toward the river, running in at a point where the bank is precipitous, so hindering thoroughfare along the stream's edge, unless when its waters are at their lowest.

Coracle's house is but a hovel, no better than the cabin of a backwoods squatter. Timber structure, too, in part, with a filling up of rough mason work. Its half-dozen perches of garden ground, once reclaimed from the wood, have grown wild again, no spade having touched them for years. The present occupant of the tenement has no taste for gardening, nor agriculture of any kind; he is a poacher, *pur sang*—at least, so far as is known. And it seems to pay him better than would the cultivation of cabbages—with pheasants at nine shillings the brace, and salmon three shillings the pound. He has the river, if not the mere, for his net, and the land for his game; making as free with both as ever did Alan-a-dale.

But, whatever the price of fish and game, be it high or low, Coracle is never without good store of cash, spending it freely at the Welsh Harp, as elsewhere; at times so lavishly, that people of suspicious nature think it cannot all be the product of night netting and snaring. Some of it, say

scandalous tongues, is derived from other industries, also practised by night, and less reputable than trespassing after game. But, as already said, these are only rumours, and confined to the few. Indeed, only a very few have intimate acquaintance with the man. He is of a reserved, taciturn habit, somewhat surly: not talkative even in his cups. And though ever ready to stand treat in the Harp tap-room he rarely practises hospitality in his own house; only now and then, when some acquaintance of like kidney and calling pays him a visit. Then the solitary domicile has its silence disturbed by the talk of men, thick as thieves—often speech which, if heard beyond its walls, 'twould not be well for its owner.

More than half time however, the poacher's dwelling is deserted, and oftener at night than by day. Its door shut, and padlocked, tells when the tenant is abroad. Then only a rough lurcher dog—a dangerous animal, too—is guardian of the place. Not that there are any chattels to tempt

the cupidity of the kleptomaniac. The most valuable moveable inside were not worth carrying away; and outside is but the coracle standing in a lean-to shed, propped up by its paddle. It is not always there, and, when absent, it may be concluded that its owner is on some expedition up, down, or across the river. Nor is the dog always at home; his absence proclaiming the poacher engaged in the terrestrial branch of his profession—running down hares or rabbits.

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It is the night of the same day that has seen the remains of Mary Morgan consigned to their resting-place in the burying-ground of the Rugg's Ferry chapel. A wild night it has turned out, dark and stormy. The autumnal equinox is on, and its gales have commenced stripping the trees of their foliage. Around the dwelling of Dick Dempsey the fallen leaves lie thick, covering the ground as with cloth of gold; at intervals torn to shreds, as the

wind swirls them up and holds them suspended.

Every now and then they are driven against the door, which is shut, but not locked. The hasp is hanging loose, the padlock with its bowed bolt open. The coracle is seen standing upright in the shed; the lurcher not anywhere outside—for the animal is within, lying upon the hearth in front of a cheerful fire. And before the same sits its master, regarding a pot which hangs over it on hooks; at intervals lifting off the lid, and stirring the contents with a long-handled spoon of white metal. What these are might be told by the aroma; a stew, smelling strongly of onions with game savour conjoined. Ground game at that, for Coracle is in the act of “jugging” a hare. Handier to no man than him were the recipe of Mrs. Glass, for he comes up to all its requirements—even the primary and essential one—knows how to catch his hare as well as cook it.

The stew is done, dished, and set steam-

ing upon the table, where already has been placed a plate—the time-honoured willow pattern—with a knife and two-pronged fork. There is, besides, a jug of water, a bottle containing brandy, and a tumbler.

Drawing his chair up, Coracle commences eating. The hare is a young one—a leveret he has just taken from the stubble—tender and juicy—delicious even without the red-currant jelly he has not got, and for which he does not care. Withal, he appears but little to enjoy the meal, and only eats as a man called upon to satisfy the cravings of hunger. Every now and then, as the fork is being carried to his head, he holds it suspended, with the morsel of flesh on its prongs, while listening to sounds outside!

At such intervals the expression upon his countenance is that of the keenest apprehension; and as a gust of wind, unusually violent, drives a leafy branch in loud clout against the door, he starts in his chair, fancying it the knock of a policeman with his muffled truncheon!

This night the poacher is suffering from

no ordinary fear of being summoned for game trespass. Were that all, he could eat his leveret as composedly as if it had been regularly purchased and paid for. But there is more upon his mind; the dread of a writ being presented to him, with shackles at the same time—of being taken handcuffed to the county jail—thence before a court of assize—and finally to the scaffold!

He has reason to apprehend all this. Notwithstanding his deep cunning, and the dexterity with which he accomplished his great crime, a man must have witnessed it. Above the roar of the torrent, mingling with the cries of the drowning girl as she struggled against it, were shouts in a man's voice, which he fancied to be that of Father Rogier. From what he has since heard he is now certain of it. The coroner's inquest, at which he was not present, but whose report has reached him, puts that beyond doubt. His only uncertainty is, whether Rogier saw him by the footbridge, and if so to recognize him. True, the priest has

nothing said of him at the 'quest; for all he, Coracle, has his suspicions; now torturing him almost as much as if sure that he was detected tampering with the plank. No wonder he eats his supper with little relish, or that after every few mouthfuls he takes a swallow of the brandy, with a view to keeping up his spirits.

Withal he has no remorse. When he recalls the hastily exchanged speeches he overheard upon Garran-hill, with that more prolonged dialogue under the trysting-tree, the expression upon his features is not one of repentance, but devilish satisfaction at the fell deed he has done. Not that his vengeance is yet satisfied. It will not be till he have the other life—that of Jack Wingate. He has dealt the young waterman a blow which at the same time afflicts himself; only by dealing a deadlier one will his own sufferings be relieved. He has been long plotting his rival's death, but without seeing a safe way to accomplish it. And now the thing seems no nearer than ever—this night farther off. In his pre-

sent frame of mind—with the dread of the gallows upon it—he would be too glad to cry quits, and let Wingate live!

Starting at every swish of the wind, he proceeds with his supper, hastily devouring it, like a wild beast; and when at length finished, he sets the dish upon the floor for the dog. Then lighting his pipe, and drawing the bottle nearer to his hand, he sits for a while smoking.

Not long before being interrupted by a noise at the door; this time no stroke of wind-tossed waif, but a touch of knuckles. Though slight and barely audible, the dog knows it to be a knock, as shown by his behaviour. Dropping the half-gnawed bone, and springing to its feet, the animal gives out an angry growling.

Its master has himself started from his chair, and stands trembling. There is a slit of a door at back convenient for escape; and for an instant his eye is on it, as though he had half a mind to make exit that way. He would blow out the light were it a candle; but cannot as it is

the fire, whose faggots are still brightly ablaze.

While thus undecided, he hears the knock repeated; this time louder, and with the accompaniment of a voice, saying:

“Open your door, Monsieur Dick.”

Not a policeman, then; only the priest!

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERIOUS CONTRACT.

“ONLY the priest!” muttered Coracle to himself, but little better satisfied than if it were the policeman.

Giving the lurcher a kick to quiet the animal, he pulls back the bolt, and draws open the door, as he does so asking, “That you, Father Rogier?”

“*C'est moi!*” answers the priest, stepping in without invitation. “Ah! *mon braconnier!* you're having something nice for supper. Judging by the aroma *ragout* of hare. Hope I haven't disturbed you. Is it hare?”

“It was, your Reverence, a bit of leveret.”

“Was! You've finished then. It is all gone?”

“It is. The dog had the remains of it, as ye see.”

He points to the dish on the floor.

“I’m sorry at that—having rather a relish for leveret. It can’t be helped, however.”

“I wish I’d known ye were comin’. Dang the dog!”

“No, no! Don’t blame the poor dumb brute. No doubt, it too has a taste for hare, seeing it’s half hound. I suppose leverets are plentiful just now, and easily caught, since they can no longer retreat to the standing corn?”

“Yes, your Reverence. There be a good wheen o’ them about.”

“In that case, if you should stumble upon one, and bring it to my house, I’ll have it jugged for myself. By the way, what have you got in that black jack?”

“It’s brandy.”

“Well, Monsieur Dick; I’ll thank you for a mouthful.”

“Will you take it neat, or mixed wi’ a drop o’ water?”

“Neat—raw. The night’s that, and the two raws will neutralize one another. I feel chilled to the bones, and a little fatigued, toiling against the storm.”

“It be a fearsome night. I wonder at your Reverence bein’ out—exposin’ yourself in such weather!”

“All weathers are alike to me—when duty calls. Just now I’m abroad on a little matter of business that won’t brook delay.”

“Business—wi’ me?”

“With you, *mon braconnier*!”

“What may it be, your Reverence?”

“Sit down, and I shall tell you. It’s too important to be discussed standing.”

The introductory dialogue does not tranquillise the poacher; instead, further intensifies his fears. Obedient, he takes his seat one side the table, the priest planting himself on the other, the glass of brandy within reach of his hand.

After a sip, he resumes speech with the remark:

“If I mistake not, you are a poor man, Monsieur Dempsey?”

"You ain't no ways mistaken 'bout that, Father Rogier."

"And you'd like to be a rich one?"

Thus encouraged, the poacher's face lights up a little. Smilingly, he makes reply:

"I can't say as I'd have any particular objection. 'Stead, I'd like it wonderful well."

"You can be, if so inclined."

"I'm ever so inclined, as I've said. But how, your Reverence? In this hard work-o'-day world 'tant so easy to get rich."

"For you, easy enough. No labour and not much more difficulty than transporting your coracle five or six miles across the meadows."

"Somethin' to do wi' the coracle, have it?"

"No; 'twill need a bigger boat—one that will carry three or four people. Do you know where you can borrow such, or hire it?"

"I think I do. I've a friend, the name

o' Rob Trotter, who's got just sich a boat. He'd lend it me, sure."

"Charter it, if he doesn't. Never mind about the price. I'll pay."

"When might you want it, your Reverence?"

"On Thursday night, at ten, or a little later—say half-past."

"And where am I to bring it?"

"To the Ferry; you'll have it against the bank by the back of the Chapel burying-ground, and keep it there till I come to you. Don't leave it to go up to the "Harp," or anywhere else; and don't let any one see either the boat or yourself, if you can possibly avoid it. As the nights are now dark at that hour, there need be no difficulty in your rowing up the river without being observed. Above all, you're to make no one the wiser of what you're to do, or anything I'm now saying to you. The service I want you for is one of a secret kind, and not to be prattled about."

"May I have a hint o' what it is?"

"Not now; you shall know in good

time—when you meet me with the boat. There will be another along with me—may be two—to assist in the affair. What will be required of you is a little dexterity, *such as you displayed on Saturday night.*”

No need the emphasis on the last words to impress their meaning upon the murderer. Too well he comprehends, starting in his chair as if a hornet had stung him.

“How—where?” he gasps out in the confusion of terror.

The double interrogatory is but mechanical, and of no consequence. Hopeless any attempt at concealment or subterfuge; as he is aware on receiving the answer, cool and provokingly deliberate.

“You have asked two questions, Monsieur Dick, that call for separate replies. To the first, ‘How?’ I leave you to grope out the answer for yourself, feeling pretty sure you’ll find it. With the second I’ll be more particular, if you wish me. Place—where a certain foot plank bridges a certain brook, close to the farmhouse of Abergann. It—the plank, I mean—last

Saturday night, a little after nine, took a fancy to go drifting down the Wye. Need I tell you who sent it, Richard Dempsey?"

The man thus interrogated looks more than confused—horrified, well nigh crazed. Excitedly stretching out his hand, he clutches the bottle, half fills the tumbler with brandy, and drinks it down at a gulp. He almost wishes it were poison, and would instantly kill him!

Only after dashing the glass down does he make reply—sullenly, and in a hoarse, husky voice:

"I don't want to know, one way or the other. D——n the plank! What do I care?"

"You shouldn't blaspheme, Monsieur Dick. That's not becoming—above all, in the presence of your spiritual adviser. However, you're excited, as I see, which is in some sense an excuse."

"I beg your Reverence's pardon. I was a bit excited about something."

He has calmed down a little, at thought that things may not be so bad for him after

all. The priest's last words, with his manner, seem to promise secrecy. Still further quieted as the latter continues :

“Never mind about what. We can talk of it afterwards. As I've made you aware—more than once, if I rightly remember—there's no sin so great but that pardon may reach it—if repented and atoned for. On Thursday night you shall have an opportunity to make some atonement. So, be there with the boat !”

“I will, your Reverence ; sure as my name's Richard Dempsey.”

Idle of him to be thus earnest in promising. He can be trusted to come as if led in a string. For he knows there is a halter around his neck, with one end of it in the hand of Father Rogier.

“Enough !” returns the priest. “If there be anything else I think of communicating to you before Thursday I'll come again—to-morrow night. So be at home. Meanwhile, see to securing the boat. Don't let there be any failure about that, *coute que coute*. And let me again

enjoin silence—not a word to any one, even your friend Rob. *Verbum sapientibus!* But as you're not much of a scholar, Monsieur Coracle, I suppose my Latin's lost on you. Putting it in your own vernacular, I mean: keep a close mouth, if you don't wish to wear a necktie of material somewhat coarser than either silk or cotton. You comprehend?"

To the priest's satanical humour the poacher answers, with a sickly smile,—

"I do, Father Rogier; perfectly."

"That's sufficient. And now, *mon braconier*, I must be gone. Before starting out, however, I'll trench a little further on your hospitality. Just another drop, to defend me from these chill equinoctials."

Saying which he leans towards the table, pours out a stoop of the brandy—best Cognac from the "Harp" it is—then quaffing it off, bids "bon soir!" and takes departure.

Having accompanied him to the door, the poacher stands upon its threshold looking after, reflecting upon what has passed,

anything but pleasantly. Never took he leave of a guest less agreeable. True, things are not quite so bad as he might have expected, and had reason to anticipate. And yet they are bad enough. He is in the toils—the tough, strong meshes of the criminal net, which at any moment may be drawn tight and fast around him; and between policeman and priest there is little to choose. For his own purposes the latter may allow him to live; but it will be as the life of one who has sold his soul to the devil!”

While thus gloomily cogitating he hears a sound, which but makes still more sombre the hue of his thoughts. A voice comes pealing up the glen—a wild, wailing cry, as of some one in the extreme of distress. He can almost fancy it the shriek of a drowning woman. But his ears are too much accustomed to nocturnal sounds, and the voices of the woods, to be deceived. That heard was only a little unusual by reason of the rough night—its tone altered by the whistling of the wind.

“Bah!” he exclaims, recognizing the call of the screech owl, “it’s only one o’ them cursed brutes. What a fool fear makes a man!”

And with this hackneyed reflection he turns back into the house, rebolts the door, and goes to his bed; not to sleep, but lie long awake—kept so by that same fear.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GAME OF PIQUE.

THE sun has gone down upon Gwen Wynn's natal day—its twenty-first anniversary—and Llangorren Court is in a blaze of light. For a grand entertainment is there being given—a ball.

The night is a dark one; but its darkness does not interfere with the festivities; instead, heightens their splendour, by giving effect to the illuminations. For although autumn, the weather is still warm, and the grounds are illuminated. Parti-coloured lamps are placed at intervals along the walks, and suspended in festoonery from the trees, while the casement windows of the house stand open, people passing in and out of them as if they were doors. The drawing-room is this night devoted to dancing; its carpet taken up, the floor

made as slippery as a skating rink with beeswax—abominable custom! Though a large apartment, it does not afford space for half the company to dance in; and to remedy this, supplementary quadrilles are arranged on the smooth turf outside—a string and wind band from the neighbouring town making music loud enough for all.

Besides, all do not care for the delightful exercise. A sumptuous spread in the dining-room, with wines at discretion, attracts a proportion of the guests; while there are others who have a fancy to go strolling about the lawn, even beyond the coruscation of the lamps; some who do not think it too dark anywhere, but the darker the better.

The *élite* of at least half the shire is present, and Miss Linton, who is still the hostess, reigns supreme in fine exuberance of spirits. Being the last entertainment at Llangorren over which she is officially to preside, one might imagine she would take things in a different way. But as she is to remain resident at the Court, with privi-

leges but slightly, if at all, curtailed, she has no gloomy forecast of the future. Instead, on this night present she lives as in the past; almost fancies herself back at Cheltenham in its days of splendour, and dancing with the "first gentleman in Europe" redivivus. If her star be going down, it is going in glory, as the song of the swan is sweetest in its dying hour.

Strange, that on such a festive occasion, with its circumstances attendant, the old spinster, hitherto mistress of the mansion, should be happier than the younger one, hereafter to be! But in truth, so is it. Notwithstanding her great beauty and grand wealth—the latter no longer in prospective, but in actual possession—despite the gaiety and grandeur surrounding her, the friendly greetings and warm congratulations received on all sides—Gwen Wynn is herself anything but gay. Instead, sad, almost to wretchedness!

And from the most trifling of causes, though not as by her estimated; little suspecting she has but herself to blame. It

has arisen out of an episode, in love's history of common and very frequent occurrence—the game of piques. She and Captain Ryecroft are playing it, with all the power and skill they can command. Not much of the last, for jealousy is but a clumsy fencer. Though accounted keen, it is often blind as love itself; and were not both under its influence they would not fail to see through the flimsy deceptions they are mutually practising on one another. In love with each other almost to distraction, they are this night behaving as though they were the bitterest enemies, or at all events as friends sorely estranged.

She began it; blamelessly, even with praiseworthy motive; which, known to him, no trouble could have come up between them. But when, touched with compassion for George Shenstone, she consented to dance with him several times consecutively, and in the intervals remained conversing—too familiarly, as Captain Ryecroft imagined—all this with an “engagement ring” on her finger, by himself placed

upon it—not strange in him, thus *fiancé*, feeling a little jealous; no more that he should endeavour to make her the same. Strategy, old as hills, or hearts themselves.

In his attempt he is, unfortunately, too successful; finding the means near by—an assistant willing and ready to his hand. This in the person of Miss Powell; she also went to church on the Sunday before in Jack Wingate's boat—a young lady so attractive as to make it a nice point whether she or Gwen Wynn be the attraction of the evening.

Though only just introduced, the Hussar officer is not unknown to her by name, with some repute of his heroism besides. His appearance speaks for itself, making such impression upon the lady as to set her pencil at work inscribing his name on her card for several dances, round and square, in rapid succession.

And so between him and Gwen Wynn the jealous feeling, at first but slightly entertained, is nursed and fanned into a burn-

ing flame—the green-eyed monster growing bigger as the night gets later.

On both sides it reaches its maximum, when Miss Wynn, after a waltz, leaning on George Shenstone's arm, walks out into the grounds, and stops to talk with him in a retired, shadowy spot.

Not far off is Captain Ryecroft observing them, but too far to hear the words passing between. Were he near enough for this, it would terminate the strife raging in his breast, as the sham flirtation he is carrying on with Miss Powell—put at end to *her* new sprung aspirations, if she has any.

It does as much for the hopes of George Shenstone—long in abeyance, but this night rekindled and revived. Beguiled, first by his partner's amiability in so oft dancing with, then afterwards using him as a foil, he little dreams that he is but being made a catspaw. Instead, drawing courage from the deception, emboldened as never before, he does what he never dared before—make Gwen Wynn a proposal of marriage. He makes it without circumlocution, at a single

bound, as he would take a hedge upon his hunter.

"Gwen! you know how I love you—would give my life for you! Will you be——" Only now he hesitates, as if his horse baulked.

"Be what?" she asks, with no intention to help him over, but mechanically, her thoughts being elsewhere.

"My wife?"

She starts at the words, touched by his manly way, yet pained by their appealing earnestness, and the thought she must give denying response.

And how is she to give it, with least pain to him? Perhaps the bluntest way will be the best. So thinking, she says:—

"George, it can never be. Look at that!"

She holds out her left hand, sparkling with jewels.

"At what?" he asks, not comprehending.

"That ring." She indicates a cluster of brilliants, on the fourth finger, by itself, adding the word "Engaged."

“O God !” he exclaims, almost in a groan.
“Is that so ?”

“It is.”

For a time there is silence ; her answer less maddening than making him sad.

With a desperate effort to resign himself, he at length replies :—

“Dear Gwen ! for I must still call you—ever hold you so—my life hereafter will be as one who walks in darkness, waiting for death—ah, longing for it !”

Despair has its poetry, as love ; oft exceeding the last in fervour of expression, and that of George Shenstone causes surprise to Gwen Wynn, while still further paining her. So much she knows not how to make rejoinder, and is glad when a *fanfare* of the band instruments gives note of another quadrille—the Lancers—about to begin.

Still engaged partners for the dance, but not to be for life, they return to the drawing-room, and join in it ; he going through its figures with a sad heart and many a sigh.

Nor is she less sorrowful, only more

excited; nigh unto madness, as she sees Captain Ryecroft *vis-a-vis* with Miss Powell; on his face an expression of content, calm, almost cynical; hers radiant as with triumph!

In this moment of Gwen Wynn's supreme misery—acme of jealous spite—were George Shenstone to renew his proposal, she might pluck the betrothal ring from her finger, and give answer, "I will!"

It is not to be so, however weighty the consequence. In the horoscope of her life there is yet a heavier.

CHAPTER IX.

JEALOUS AS A TIGER.

It is a little after two A.M., and the ball is breaking up. Not a very late hour, as many of the people live at a distance, and have a long drive homeward, over hilly roads.

By the fashion prevailing a *galop* brings the dancing to a close. The musicians, slipping their instruments into cases and baize bags, retire from the room ; soon after deserted by all, save a spare servant or two, who make the rounds to look to extinguishing the lamps, with a sharp eye for waifs in the shape of dropped ribbons or *bijouterie*.

Gentlemen guests stay longer in the dining-room over claret and champagne "cup," or the more time-honoured B. and S.; while in the hallway there is a crush,

and on the stairs a stream of ladies, descending cloaked and hooded.

Soon the crowd waxes thinner, relieved by carriages called up, quickly filling, and whirled off.

That of Squire Powell is among them; and Captain Ryecroft, not without comment from certain officious observers, accompanies the young lady, he has been so often dancing with, to the door.

Having seen her off with the usual ceremonies of leave-taking, he returns into the porch, and there for a while remains. It is a large portico, with Corinthian columns, by one of which he takes stand, in shadow. But there is a deeper shadow on his own brow, and a darkness in his heart, such as he has never in his life experienced. He feels how he has committed himself, but not with any remorse or repentance. Instead, the jealous anger is still within his breast, ripe and ruthless as ever. Nor is it so unnatural. Here is a woman—not Miss Powell, but Gwen Wynn—to whom he has given his heart—acknowledged the sur-

render, and in return had acknowledgment of hers—not only this, but offered his hand in marriage—placed the pledge upon her finger, she assenting and accepting—and now, in the face of all, openly, and before his face, engaged in flirtation !

It is not the first occasion for him to have observed familiarities between her and the son of Sir George Shenstone ; trifling, it is true, but which gave him uneasiness. But to-night things have been more serious, and the pain caused him all-imbuing and bitter.

He does not reflect how he has been himself behaving. For to none more than the jealous lover is the big beam unobservable, while the little mote is sharply descried. He only thinks of her ill-behaviour, ignoring his own. If she has been but dissembling, coquetting with him, even that were reprehensible. Heartless, he deems it—sinister—something more, an indiscretion. Flirting while engaged—what might she do when married ?

He does not wrong her by such direct self-interrogation. The suspicion were un-

worthy of himself, as of her ; and as yet he has not given way to it. Still her conduct seems inexcusable, as inexplicable ; and to get explanation of it he now tarries, while others are hastening away.

Not resolutely. Besides the half sad, half indignant expression upon his countenance, there is also one of indecision. He is debating within himself what course to pursue, and whether he will go off without bidding her good-bye. He is almost mad enough to be ill-mannered ; and possibly, were it only a question of politeness, he would not stand upon, or be stayed by it. But there is more. The very same spiteful rage hinders him from going. He thinks himself aggrieved, and, therefore, justifiable in demanding to know the reason—to use a slang, but familiar phrase, “having it out.”

Just as he has reached this determination, an opportunity is offered him. Having taken leave of Miss Linton, he has returned to the door, where he stands hat in hand, his overcoat already on. Miss Wynn is

now also there, bidding good night to some guests—intimate friends—who have remained till the last. As they move off, he approaches her; she, as if unconsciously, and by the merest chance, 'lingering near the entrance. It is all pretence on her part, that she has not seen him dallying about; for she has several times, while giving *conge* to others of the company. Equally feigned her surprise, as she returns his salute, saying—

“Why, Captain Ryecroft! I supposed you were gone long ago!”

“I am sorry, Miss Wynn, you should think me capable of such rudeness.”

“Captain Ryecroft” and “Miss Wynn,” instead of “Vivian” and “Gwen!” It is a bad beginning, ominous of a worse ending.

The rejoinder, almost a rebuke, places her at a disadvantage, and she says rather confusedly—

“O! certainly not, sir. But where there are so many people, of course, one does not look for the formalities of leave-taking.”

“ True ; and, availing myself of that, I might have been gone long since, as you supposed, but for——”

“ For what ? ”

“ A word I wish to speak with you—alone. Can I ? ”

“ Oh, certainly.”

“ Not here ? ” he asks suggestingly.

She glances around. There are servants hurrying about through the hall, crossing and recrossing, with the musicians coming forth from the dining-room, where they have been making a clearance of the cold fowl, ham, and heel taps.

With quick intelligence comprehending, but without further speech she walks out into the portico, he preceding. Not to remain there, where eyes would still be on them, and ears within hearing. She has an Indian shawl upon her arm—throughout the night carried while promenading—and again throwing it over her shoulders, she steps down upon the gravelled sweep, and on into the grounds.

Side by side they proceed in the direction

of the summer-house, as many times before, though never in the same mood as now. And never, as now, so constrained and silent; for not a word passes between them till they reach the pavilion.

There is light in it. But a few hundred yards from the house, it came in for part of the illumination, and its lamps are not yet extinguished—only burning feebly.

She is the first to enter—he to resume speech, saying—

“There was a day, Miss Wynn, when, standing on this spot, I thought myself the happiest man in Herefordshire. Now I know it was but a fancy—a sorry hallucination.”

“I do not understand you, Captain Rye-croft!”

“Oh yes, you do. Pardon my contradicting you; you’ve given me reason.”

“Indeed! In what way? I beg, nay, demand, explanation.”

“You shall have it; though superfluous, I should think, after what has been passing—this night especially.”

“Oh ! this night especially ! I supposed you so much engaged with Miss Powell as not to have noticed anything or anybody else. What was it, pray ?”

“You understand, I take it, without need of my entering into particulars.”

“Indeed, I don’t ; unless you refer to my dancing with George Shenstone.”

“More than dancing with him—keeping his company all through !”

“Not strange that ; seeing I was left so free to keep it ! Besides, as I suppose you know, his father was my father’s oldest and most intimate friend.”

She makes this avowal condescendingly, observing he is really vexed, and thinking the game of contraries has gone far enough. He has given her a sight of his cards, and with the quick subtle instinct of woman she sees that among them Miss Powell is no longer chief trump. Were his perception keen as hers, their jealous conflict would now come to a close, and between them confidence and friendship, stronger than ever, be restored.

Unfortunately it is not to be. Still miscomprehending, yet unyielding, he rejoins, sneeringly—

“And I suppose your father’s daughter is determined to continue that intimacy with his father’s son; which might not be so very pleasant to him who should be your husband! Had I thought of that when I placed a ring upon your finger——”

Before he can finish she has plucked it off, and drawing herself up to full height, says in bitter retort—

“You insult me, sir! Take it back!”

With the words, the gemmed circlet is flung upon the little rustic table, from which it rolls off.

He has not been prepared for such abrupt issue, though his rude speech tempted it. Somewhat sorry, but still too exasperated to confess or show it, he rejoins, defiantly:—

“If you wish it to end so, let it!”

“Yes; let it!”

They part without further speech. He, being nearest the door, goes out first, taking

no heed of the diamond cluster which lies sparkling upon the floor.

Neither does she touch, or think of it. Were it the Koh-i-noor, she would not care for it now. A jewel more precious—the one love of her life is lost—cruelly crushed—and, with heart all but breaking, she sinks down upon the bench, draws the shawl over her face, and weeps till its rich silken tissue is saturated with her tears.

The wild spasm passed, she rises to her feet, and stands leaning upon the baluster rail, looking out and listening. Still dark, she sees nothing; but hears the stroke of a boat's oars in measured and regular repetition—listens on till the sound becomes indistinct, blending with the sough of the river, the sighing of the breeze, and the natural voices of the night.

She may never hear *his* voice, never look on his face again!

At the thought she exclaims, in anguished accent, "This the ending! It is too——"

What she designed saying is not said. Her interrupted words are continued into a

shriek—one wild cry—then her lips are sealed, suddenly, as if stricken dumb, or dead!

Not by the visitation of God. Before losing consciousness, she felt the embrace of brawny arms—knew herself the victim of man's violence.

CHAPTER X.

STUNNED AND SILENT.

DOWN in the boat-dock, upon the thwarts of his skiff, sits the young waterman awaiting his fare. He has been up to the house and there hospitably entertained—feasted. But with the sorrow of his recent bereavement still fresh, the revelry of the servants' hall had no fascination for him—instead, only saddening the more. Even the blandishments of the French *femme de chambre* could not detain him; and fleeing them, he has returned to his boat long before he expects being called upon to use the oars.

Seated, pipe in mouth—for Jack too indulges in tobacco—he is endeavouring to put in the time as well as he can; irksome at best with that bitter grief upon him

And it is present all the while, with scarce a moment of surcease, his thoughts ever dwelling on her who is sleeping her last sleep in the burying-ground at Rugg's Ferry.

While thus disconsolately reflecting, a sound falls upon his ears, which claims his attention, and for an instant or two occupies it. If anything, it was the dip of an oar; but so light that only one with ears well-trained to distinguish noises of the kind could tell it to be that. He, however, has no doubt of it, muttering to himself—

“Wonder whose boat can be on the river this time o' night—mornin', I ought to say? Wouldn't be a tourist party—starting off so early? No, can't be that. Like enough Dick Dempsey out a-salmon stealin'! The night so dark—just the sort for the rascal to be about on his unlawful business.”

While thus conjecturing, a scowl, dark as the night itself, flits over his own face.

“Yes; a coracle!” he continues; “must 'a been the plash o' a paddle. If't had

been a regular boat's oar I'd a heerd the thumpin' against the thole pins."

For once the waterman is in error. It is no paddle whose stroke he has heard, nor a coracle impelled by it; but a boat rowed by a pair of oars. And why there is no "thumpin' against the thole pins" is because the oars are muffled. Were he out in the main channel—two hundred yards above the byeway—he would see the craft itself with three men in it. But only at that instant; as in the next it is headed into a bed of "witheys"—flooded by the freshet—and pushed on through them to the bank beyond.

Soon it touches *terra firma*, the men spring out; two of them going off towards the grounds of Llangorren Court. The third remains by the boat.

Meanwhile, Jack Wingate, in his skiff, continues listening. But hearing no repetition of the sound that had so slightly reached his ear, soon ceases to think of it; again giving way to his grief, as he returns to reflect on what lies in the chapel cemetery.

If he but knew how near the two things were together—the burying-ground and the boat—he would not be long in his own.

Relieved he is, when at length voices are heard up at the house—calls for carriages—proclaiming the ball about to break up. Still more gratified, as the banging of doors, and the continuous rumble of wheels, tell of the company fast clearing off.

For nigh half an hour the rattling is incessant; then there is a lull, and he listens for a sound of a different sort—a footfall on the stone stairs that lead down to the little dock—that of his fare, who may at any moment be expected.

Instead of footstep, he hears voices on the cliff above, off in the direction of the summer-house. Nothing to surprise him that? It is not first time he has listened to the same, and under very similar circumstances; for soon as hearing he recognizes them. But it is the first time for him to note their tone as it is now—to his astonishment that of anger.

“They be quarrellin’, I declare,” he says

to himself. "Wonder what for! Some-thin' crooked's come between 'em at the ball—bit o' jealousy, maybe? I shudn't be surprised if it's about young Mr. Shenstone. Sure as eggs is eggs, the Captain have ugly ideas consarnin' him. He needn't, though; an' wouldn't, if he seed through the eyes o' a sensible man. Course, bein' deep in love, he can't. I seed it long ago. She be mad about him as he o' her—if not madder. Well; I daresay it be only a lovers' quarrel an'll soon blow over. Woe's me! I weesh—"

He would say "I weesh 'twar only that 'twixt myself an' Mary," but the words break upon his lips, while a scalding tear trickles down his cheek.

Fortunately his anguished sorrow is not allowed further indulgence for the time. The footstep, so long listened for, is at length upon the boat stair; not firm, in its wonted way, but as though he making it were intoxicated!

But Wingate does not believe it is that. He knows the Captain to be abstemious,

or, at all events, not greatly given to drink. He has never seen him overcome by it; and surely he would not be, on this night in particular. Unless, indeed, it may have to do with the angry speech overheard, or the something thought of preceding it!

The conjectures of the waterman, are brought to an end by the arrival of his fare at the bottom of the boat stair, where he stops only to ask—

“Are you there, Jack?”

The pitchy darkness accounts for the question.

Receiving answer in the affirmative, he gropes his way along the ledge of rock, reeling like a drunken man. Not from drink, but the effects of that sharp, defiant rejoinder still ringing in his ears. He seems to hear, in every gust of the wind swirling down from the cliff above, the words, “Yes; let it!”

He knows where the skiff should be—where it was left—beyond the pleasure boat. The dock is not wide enough for both abreast, and to reach his own he must

go across the other—make a gang-plank of the *Gwendoline*.

As he sets foot upon the thwarts of the pleasure craft, has he a thought of what were his feelings when he first planted it there, after ducking the Forest of Dean fellow? Or, stepping off, does he spurn the boat with angry heel, as in angry speech he has done her whose name it bears? Neither. He is too excited and confused to think of the past, or aught but the black bitter present.

Still staggering, he drops down upon the stern sheets of the skiff, commanding the waterman to shove off.

A command promptly obeyed, and in silence. Jack can see the Captain is out of sorts, and suspecting the reason, naturally supposes that speech at such time might not be welcome. He says nothing, therefore; but, bending to his oars, pulls on up the byeway.

Just outside its entrance a glimpse can be got of the little pavilion—by looking back. And Captain Ryecroft does this,

over his shoulder; for, seated at the tiller, his face is from it. The light is still there, burning dimly as ever. For all, he is enabled to trace the outlines of a figure, in shadowy *silhouette*—a woman standing by the baluster rail, as if looking out over it.

He knows who it is; it can only be Gwen Wynn. Well were it for both could he but know what she is at that moment thinking. If he did, back would go his boat, and the two again be together—perhaps never more to part in spite.

Just then, as if ominous, and in spiteful protest against such consummation, the sombre sandstone cliff draws between, and Captain Ryecroft is carried onward, with heart dark and heavy as the rock.

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING CRY.

DURING all this while Wingate has not spoken a word, though he also has observed the same figure in the pavilion. With face that way he could not avoid noticing it, and easily guesses who she is. Had he any doubt the behaviour of the other would remove it.

“Miss Wynn, for sartin,” he thinks to himself, but says nothing.

Again turning his eyes upon his patron, he notes the distraught air, with head drooping, and feels the effect in having to contend against the rudder ill directed. But he forbears making remark. At such a moment his interference might not be tolerated—perhaps resented. And so the silence continues.

Not much longer. A thought strikes

the waterman, and he ventures a word about the weather. It is done for a kindly feeling—for he sees how the other suffers—but in part because he has a reason for it. The observation is—

“We’re goin’ to have the biggest kind o’ a rainpour Captain.”

The Captain makes no immediate response. Still in the morose mood, communing with his own thoughts, the words fall upon his ear unmeaningly, as if from a distant echo.

After a time it occurs to him he has been spoken to and asks—

“What did you observe, Wingate?”

“That there be a rain storm threatenin’, o’ the grandest sort. There’s flood enough now; but afore long it’ll be all over the meadows.”

“Why do you think that? I see no sign. The sky’s very much clouded true; but it has been just the same for the last several days.”

“’Tan’t the sky as tells me, Captain.”

“What then?”

“The *heequall*.”

“The heequall?”

“Yes. It’s been a cacklin’ all through the afternoon and evenin’—especial loud just as the sun wor settin’. I nivir know’d it do that ’ithout plenty o’ wet comin’ soon after.”

Ryecroft’s interest is aroused, and for the moment forgetting his misery, he says:—

“You’re talking enigmas, Jack! At least they are so to me. What is this barometer you seem to place such confidence in? Beast, bird, or fish?”

“It be a bird, Captain? I believe the gentry folks calls it a woodpecker; but ’bout here it be more generally known by the name *heequall*.”

The orthography is according to Jack’s orthoepy, for there are various spellings of the word.

“Anyhow,” he proceeds, “it gies warnin’ o’ rain, same as a weather-glass. When it ha’ been laughin’ in the mad way it wor most part o’ this day, you may look out for a downpour. Besides, the owls ha’ been.

a-doin' their best, too. While I wor waiting for ye in that darksome hole, one went sailin' up an' down the backwash, every now an' then swishin' close to my ear and giein' a screech—as if I hadn't enough o' the disagreeable to think o'. They allus come that way when one's feelin' out o' sorts—just as if they wanted to make things worse. Hark! D'd ye hear that, Captain?"

"I did."

They speak of a sound that has reached their ears from below—down the river.

Both show agitation, but most the waterman; for it resembled a shriek, as of a woman in distress. Distant, just as one he heard across the wooded ridge, on that fatal night after parting with Mary Morgan. He knows now, that must have been her drowning cry, and has often thought since whether, if aware of it at the time, he could have done aught to rescue her. Not strange, that with such a recollection he is now greatly excited by a sound so similar!

"That waren't no heequall; nor screech-

owl neyther," he says, speaking in a half whisper.

"What do you think it was?" asks the Captain, also *sotto voce*.

"The scream 'o a female. I'm 'most sure 'twor that."

"It certainly did seem a woman's voice. In the direction of the Court, too!"

"Yes; it comed that way."

"I've half a mind to put back, and see if there be anything amiss. What say you, Wingate?"

"Gie the word, sir! I'm ready."

The boatman has his oars out of water, and holds them so, Ryecroft still undecided. Both listen with bated breath. But, whether woman's voice, or whatever the sound, they hear nothing more of it; only the monotonous ripple of the river, the wind mournfully sighing through the trees upon its banks, and a distant "brattle," of thunder, bearing out the portent of the bird.

"Like as not," says Jack, "'twor some o' them sarvint girls screechin' in play, fra havin' had a drop too much to drink.

There's a Frenchy thing among 'em as wor gone nigh three sheets i' the wind 'fores I left. I think, Captain, we may as well keep on."

The waterman has an eye to the threatening rain, and dreads getting a wet jacket.

But his words are thrown away; for, meanwhile, the boat, left to itself, has drifted downward, nearly back to the entrance of the byeway, and they are once more within sight of the kiosk on the cliff. There all is darkness; no figure distinguishable. The lamps have burnt out, or been removed by some of the servants.

"She has gone away from it," is Rye-croft's reflection to himself. "I wonder if the ring be still on the floor—or, has she taken it with her! I'd give something to know that."

Beyond he sees a light in the upper window of the house—that of a bedroom no doubt. She may be in it, unrobing herself, before retiring to rest. Perhaps standing in front of a mirror, which reflects that form of magnificent outline he was once

permitted to hold in his arms, thrilled by the contact, and never to be thrilled so again! Her face in the glass—what the expression upon it? Sadness, or joy? If the former, she is thinking of him; if the latter of George Shenstone.

As this reflection flits across his brain, the jealous rage returns, and he cries out to the waterman—

“Row back, Wingate! Pull hard, and let us home!”

Once more the boat's head is turned upstream, and for a long spell no further conversation is exchanged—only now and then a word relating to the management of the craft, as between rower and steerer. Both have relapsed into abstraction—each dwelling on his own bereavement. Perhaps boat never carried two men with sadder hearts, or more bitter reflections. Nor is there so much difference in the degree of their bitterness. The sweetheart, almost bride, who has proved false, seems to her lover not less lost, than to hers she who has been snatched away by death!

As the *Mary* runs into the slip of back-water—her accustomed mooring-place—and they step out of her, the dialogue is renewed by the owner asking—

“Will ye want me the morrow, Captain?”

“No, Jack.”

“How soon do you think? ’Scuse me for questionin’; but young Mr. Powell have been here the day, to know if I could take him an’ a friend down the river, all the way to the Channel. It’s for sea fishin’ or duck shootin’ or somethin’ o’ that sort; an’ they want to engage the boat most part o’ a week. But, if you say the word, they must look out for somebody else. That be the reason o’ my askin’ when’s you’d need me again.”

“Perhaps never.”

“Oh! Captain; don’t say that. ’Tan’t as I care ’bout the boat’s hire, or the big pay you’ve been givin’ me. Believe me it ain’t. Ye can have me an’ the *Mary* ’ithout a sixpence o’ expense—long’s ye like. But to think I’m niver to row you

again, that 'ud vex me dreadful—maybe more'n ye gi'e me credit for, Captain."

"More than I give you credit for! It couldn't, Jack. We've been too long together for me to suppose you actuated by mercenary motives. Though I may never need your boat again, or see yourself, don't have any fear of my forgetting you. And now, as a souvenir, and some slight recompense of your services, take this."

The waterman feels a piece of paper pressed into his hand, its crisp rustle proclaiming it a bank-note. It is a "tenner," but in the darkness he cannot tell, and believing it only a "fiver," still thinks it too much. For it is all extra of his fare.

With a show of returning it, and, indeed, the desire to do so, he says protestingly—

"I can't take it, Captain. You ha' paid me too handsome, arredy.

"Nonsense, man! I haven't done anything of the kind. Besides, that isn't for boat hire, nor yourself; only a little

douceur, by way of present to the good dame inside the cottage—asleep, I take it.”

“That case I accept. But I won’t my mother be grieved to hear o’ your goin’ away—she thinks so much o’ ye, Captain. Will ye let me wake her up? I’m sure she’d like to speak a partin’ word, and thank you for this big gift.”

“No, no! don’t disturb the dear old lady. In the morning you can give her my kind regards, and parting compliments. Say to her, when I return to Herefordshire—if I ever do—she shall see me. For yourself, take my word, should I ever again go rowing on this river it will be in a boat called the *Mary*, pulled by the best waterman on the Wye.”

Modest though Jack Wingate be, he makes no pretence of misunderstanding the recondite compliment, but accepts it in its fullest sense, rejoining—

“I’d call it flattery, Captain, if’t had come from anybody but you. But I know ye never talk nonsense; an’ that’s just why I be so sad to hear ye say you’re goin’ off

for good. I feeled so bad 'bout losin' poor Mary; it makes it worse now losin' you. Good night!"

The Hussar officer has a horse, which has been standing in a little lean-to shed, under saddle. The lugubrious dialogue has been carried on simultaneously with the bridling, and the "Good night" is said as Ryecroft springs up on his stirrup.

Then as he rides away into the darkness, and Jack Wingate stands listening to the departing hoof-stroke, at each repetition more indistinct, he feels indeed forsaken, forlorn; only one thing in the world now worth living for—but one to keep him anchored to life—his aged mother!

CHAPTER XII.

MAKING READY FOR THE ROAD.

HAVING reached his hotel, Captain Rye-croft seeks neither rest nor sleep, but stays awake for the remainder of the night.

The first portion of his time he spends in gathering up his *impedimenta*, and packing. Not a heavy task. His luggage is light, according to the simplicity of a soldier's wants ; and as an old campaigner he is not long in making ready for the *route*.

His fishing tackle, guncase and portman-teau, with an odd bundle or two of miscellaneous effects, are soon strapped and corded. After which he takes a seat by a table to write out the labels.

But now a difficulty occurs to him—the address ! His name of course, but what the destination ? Up to this moment he

has not thought of where he is going ; only that he must go somewhere—away from the Wye. There is no Lethe in that stream for memories like his.

To his regiment he cannot return, for he has none now. Months since he ceased to be a soldier ; having resigned his commission at the expiration of his leave of absence—partly in displeasure at being refused extension of it, but more because the attractions of the “Court” and the grove had made those of the camp uncongenial. Thus his visit to Herefordshire has not only spoilt him as a salmon fisher, but put an end to his military career.

Fortunately he was not dependent on it ; for Captain Ryecroft is a rich man. And yet he has no home he can call his own ; the ten latest years of his life having been passed in Hindostan. Dublin is his native place ; but what would or could he now do there ? his nearest relatives are dead, his friends few, his schoolfellows long since scattered—many of them, as himself, waifs upon the world. Besides, since his

return from India, he has paid a visit to the capital of the Emerald Isle ; where, finding all so changed, he cares not to go back—at least, for the present.

Whither then ?

One place looms upon the imagination—almost naturally as home itself—the metropolis of the world. He will proceed thither, though not there to stay. Only to use it as a point of departure for another metropolis—the French one. In that focus and centre of gaiety and fashion—Maelstrom of dissipation—he may find some relief from his misery, if not happiness. Little hope has he ; but it may be worth the trial and he will make it.

So determining, he takes up the pen, and is about to put “London” on the labels. But as an experienced strategist, who makes no move with undue haste and without due deliberation, he sits a while longer considering.

Strange as it may seem, and a question for psychologists, a man thinks best upon his back. Better still with a cigar between

his teeth—powerful help to reflection. Aware of this, Captain Ryecroft lights a “weed,” and looks around him. He is in his sleeping apartment, where, besides the bed, there is a sofa—horsehair cushion and squab hard as stones—the orthodox hotel article.

Along this he lays himself, and smokes away furiously. Spitefully, too; for he is not now thinking of either London or Paris. He cannot yet. The happy past, the wretched present, are too soul-absorbing to leave room for speculations of the future. The “fond rage of love” is still active within him. Is it to “blight his life’s bloom,” leaving him “an age all winters?” Or is there yet a chance of reconciliation? Can the chasm which angry words have created be bridged over? No. Not without confession of error—abject humiliation on his part—which in his present frame of mind he is not prepared to make—will not—could not.

“Never!” he exclaims, plucking the cigar from between his lips, but soon

returning it, to continue the train of his reflections.

Whether from the soothing influence of the nicotine, or other cause, his thoughts after a time became more tranquillised—their hue sensibly changed, as betokened by some muttered words which escape him.

“After all, I may be wronging her. If so, may God forgive, as I hope He will pity me. For if so, I am less deserving forgiveness, and more to be pitied than she.”

As in ocean's storm, between the rough surging billows foam-crested, are spots of smooth water, so in thought's tempest are intervals of calm. It is during one of these he speaks as above; and continuing to reflect in the same strain, things, if not quite *colour de rose*, assume a less repulsive aspect. Gwen Wynn may have been but dissembling—playing with him—and he would now be contented, ready—even rejoiced—to accept it in that sense; ay, to the abject humiliation that but the moment before he had so defiantly rejected. So reversed his sentiments now—modified

from mad anger to gentle forgiveness—he is almost in the act of springing to his feet, tearing the straps from his packed paraphernalia, and letting all loose again!

But just at this crisis he hears the town clock tolling six, and voices in conversation under his window. It is a bit of gossip between two stable-men—attachés of the hotel—an ostler and fly-driver.

“Ye had a big time last night at Llangorren?” says the former, inquiringly.

“Ah! that ye may say,” returns the Jarvey, with a strongly accentuated hiccup, telling of heel-taps. “Never knowed a bigger, s’help me. Wine runnin’ in rivers, as if ’twas only table-beer—an’ the best kind o’t too. I’m so full o’ French champagne, I feel most like burstin’.”

“She be a grand gal, that Miss Wynn. An’t she?”

“In course is—one o’ the grandest. But she an’t going to be a *girl* long. By what I heerd them say in the sarvints’ hall, she’s soon to be broke into pair-horse harness.”

“Wi’ who?”

“The son o’ Sir George Shenstone.”

“A good match they’ll make, I sh’d say. Tidier chap than he never stepped inside this yard. Many’s the time he’s tipped me.”

There is more of the same sort, but Captain Ryecroft does not hear it; the men having moved off beyond earshot. In all likelihood he would not have listened, had they stayed. For again he seems to hear those other words—that last spiteful rejoinder—“Yes; let it.”

His own spleen returning, in all its keen hostility, he springs upon his feet, hastily steps back to the table, and writes on the slips of parchment—

*Mr. Vivian Ryecroft,
Passenger to London,
G. W. R.*

He cannot attach them till the ink gets dry; and, while waiting for it to do so, his thoughts undergo still another revulsion; again leading him to reflect whether he may

not be in the wrong, and acting inconsiderately—rashly.

In fine, he resolves on a course which had not hitherto occurred to him—he will write to her. Not in repentance, nor any confession of guilt on his part. He is too proud, and still too doubting for that. Only a test letter to draw her out, and if possible, discover how she too feels under the circumstances. Upon the answer—if he receive one—will depend whether it is to be the last.

With pen still in hand, he draws a sheet of notepaper towards him. It bears the hotel stamp and name, so that he has no need to write an address—only the date.

This done, he remains for a time considering—thinking what he should say. The larger portion of his manhood's life spent in camp, under canvas—not the place for cultivating literary tastes or epistolary style—he is at best an indifferent correspondent, and knows it. But the occasion supplies thoughts; and as a soldier accustomed to prompt brevity he puts them down—

quickly and briefly as a campaigning despatch.

With this, he does not wait for the ink to dry, but uses the blotter. He dreads another change of resolution. Folding up the sheet, he slips it into an envelope, on which he simply superscribes—

Miss Wynn,
Llangorren Court.

Then rings a bell—the hotel servants are now astir—and directs the letter to be dropped into the post box.

He knows it will reach her that same day, at an early hour, and its answer him—should one be vouchsafed—on the following morning. It might that same night at the hotel where he is now staying; but not the one to which he is going—as his letter tells, the “Langham, London.”

And while it is being slowly carried by a pedestrian postman, along hilly roads towards Llangorren, he, seated in a first-class carriage of the G. W. R., is swiftly whisked towards the metropolis.

CHAPTER XIII.

A SLUMBERING HOUSEHOLD.

As calm succeeds a storm, so at Llangorren Court on the morning after the ball there was quietude—up to a certain hour more than common. The domestics justifying themselves by the extra services of the preceding night, lie late. Outside is stirring only the gardener with an assistant, at his usual work, and in the yard a stable help or two looking after the needs of the horses. The more important functionaries of this department—coachman and head-groom still slumber, dreaming of champagne bottles brought back to the servants' hall three parts full with but half demolished pheasants, and other fragmentary delicacies.

Inside the house things are on a parallel; there only a scullery and kitchen maid astir. The higher class servitors availing them-

selves of the license allowed, are still abed, and it is ten as butler, cook, and footman make their appearance, entering on their respective *rôles* yawningly, and with reluctance.

There are two lady's-maids in the establishment; the little French demoiselle attached to Miss Linton, and an English damsel of more robust build, whose special duties are to wait upon Miss Wynn. The former lies late on all days, her mistress not requiring early manipulation; but the maid "native and to the manner born," is wont to be up betimes. This morning is an exception. After such a night of revelry, slumber holds her enthralled, as in a trance; and she is abed late as any of the others, sleeping like a dormouse.

As her dormitory window looks out upon the back yard, the stable clock, a loud striker, at length awakes her. Not in time to count the strokes, but a glance at the dial gives her the hour.

While dressing herself she is in a flutter, fearing rebuke. Not for having slept so

late, but because of having gone to sleep so early. The dereliction of duty, about which she is so apprehensive, has reference to a spell of slumber antecedent—taken upon a sofa in her young mistress's dressing-room. There awaiting Miss Wynn to assist in disrobing her after the ball, the maid dropped over and forgot everything—only remembering who she was, and what her duties, when too late to attend to them. Starting up from the sofa, and glancing at the mantel timepiece, she saw, with astonishment, its hands pointing to half-past 4 A.M.!

Reflection following:—

“Miss Gwen must be in her bed by this! Wonder why she didn't wake me up? Rang no bell? Surely I'd have heard it? If she did, and I haven't answered—Well; the dear young lady's just the sort not to make any ado about it. I suppose she thought I'd gone to my room, and didn't wish to disturb me? But how could she think that? Besides, she must have passed through here, and seen me on the sofa!” The dressing-

room is an ante-chamber of Miss Wynn's sleeping apartment. "She mightn't though,"—the contradiction suggested by the lamp burning low and dim,—“Still, it *is* strange, her not calling me, nor requiring my attendance?”

Gathering herself up, the girl stands for a while in cogitation. The result is a move across the carpeted floor in soft stealthy step, and an ear laid close to the keyhole of the bedchamber door.

“Sound asleep! I can't go in now. Mustn't—I daren't awake her.”

Saying which the negligent attendant slips off to her own sleeping room, a flight higher; and in ten minutes after, is herself once more in the arms of Morpheus; this time retained in them till released, as already said, by the tolling of the stable clock.

Conscious of unpardonable remissness, she dresses in careless haste—any way, to be in time for attendance on her mistress, at morning toilet.

Her first move is to hurry down to the kitchen, get the can of hot water, and take

it up to Miss Wynn's sleeping room. Not to enter, but tap at the door and leave it.

She does the tapping; and, receiving no response nor summons from inside, concludes that the young lady is still asleep and not to be disturbed. It is a standing order of the house, and pleased to be precise in its observance—never more than on this morning—she sets down the painted can, and hurries back to the kitchen, soon after taking her seat by a breakfast table, unusually well spread, for the time to forget about her involuntary neglect of duty.

The first of the family proper, appearing down stairs is Eleanor Lees; she, too, much behind her accustomed time. Notwithstanding, she has to find occupation for nearly an hour before any of the others join her; and she endeavours to do this by perusing a newspaper which has come by the morning post.

With indifferent success. It is a Metropolitan daily, having but little in it to interest her, or indeed any one else; almost barren of news, as if its columns were

blank. Three or four long-winded "leaders," the impertinent outpourings of irresponsible anonymity; reports of Parliamentary speeches, four-fifths of them not worth reporting; chatter of sham statesmen, with their drivellings at public dinners; "Police intelligence," in which there is half a column devoted to Daniel Driscoll, of the Seven Dials, how he blackened the eye of Bridget Sullivan, and bit off Pat Kavanagh's ear, a *crim. con.* or two in all their prurience of detail; Court intelligence, with its odious plush and petty paltriness—this is the pabulum of a "London Daily" even the leading one supplies to its easily satisfied *clientèle* of readers! Scarce a word of the world's news, scarce a word to tell of its real life and action—how beats the pulse, or thrills the heart of humanity! If there be anything in England half a century behind the age it is its Metropolitan Press—immeasurably inferior to the Provincial.

No wonder the "companion"—educated lady—with only such a sheet for her companion, cannot kill time for even so much

as an hour. Ten minutes were enough to dispose of all its contents worth glancing at.

And after glancing at them, Miss Lees drops the bald broadsheet—letting it fall to the floor to be scratched by the claws of a playful kitten—about all it is worth.

Having thus settled scores with the newspaper she hardly knows what next to do. She has already inspected the superscription of the letters, to see if there be any for herself. A poor, fortuneless girl, of course her correspondence is limited, and there is none. Two or three for Miss Linton, with quite half a dozen for Gwen. Of these last is one in a handwriting she recognizes—knows it to be from Captain Ryecroft, even without the hotel stamp to aid identification.

“There was a coolness between them last night,” remarks Miss Lees to herself, “if not an actual quarrel; to which, very likely, this letter has reference. If I were given to making wagers, I’d bet that it tells of his repentance. So soon, though! It must

have been written after he got back to his hotel, and posted to catch the early delivery. "What!" she exclaims, taking up another letter, and scanning the superscription. "One from George Shenstone, too! It, I dare say, is in a different strain, if that I saw—— Ha!" she ejaculates, instinctively turning to the window, and letting go Mr. Shenstone's epistle, "William! Is it possible—so early?"

Not only possible, but an accomplished fact. The reverend gentleman is inside the gates of the park, sauntering on towards the house.

She does not wait for him to ring the bell, or knock; but meets him at the door, herself opening it. Nothing *outré* in the act, on a day succeeding a night, with everything upside down, and the domestic, whose special duty it is to attend to door-opening, out of the way.

Into the morning room Mr. Musgrave is conducted, where the table is set for breakfast. He oft comes for luncheon, and Miss Lees knows he will be made equally wel-

come to the earlier meal; all the more to-day, with its heavier budget of news, and grander details of gossip, which Miss Linton will be expecting and delighted to revel in. Of course, the curate has been at the ball; but, like "Slippery Sam," erst Bishop of Oxford, not much in the dancing room. For all, he, too, has noticed certain peculiarities in the behaviour of Miss Wynn to Captain Ryecroft, with others having reference to the son of Sir George Shenstone—in short, a triangular play he but ill understood. Still, he could tell by the straws, as they blew about, that they were blowing adversely; though what the upshot he is yet ignorant, having, as became his cloth, forsaken the scene of revelry at a respectably early hour.

Nor does he now care to inquire into it, any more than Miss Lees to respond to such interrogation. Their own affair is sufficient for the time; and engaging in an amorous duel of the milder type—so different from the stormy passionate combat between Gwendoline Wynn and Vivian

Ryecroft — they forget all about these— even their existence—as little remembering that of George Shenstone.

For a time are but two individuals in the world of whom either has a thought—one Eleanor Lees, the other William Musgrave.

CHAPTER XIV.

“WHERE’S GWEN?”

Not for long are the companion and curate permitted to carry on the confidential dialogue, in which they had become interested. Too disagreeably soon is it interrupted by a third personage appearing upon the scene. Miss Linton has at length succeeded in dragging herself out of the embrace of the somnolent divinity, and enters the breakfast-room, supported by her French *femme de chambre*.

Graciously saluting Mr. Musgrave, she moves towards the table’s head, where an antique silver urn sends up its curling steam—flanked by tea and coffee pot, with contents already prepared for pouring into their respectively shaped cups. Taking her seat, she asks :

“Where’s Gwen?”

"Not down yet," meekly responds Miss Lees, "at least I haven't seen anything of her."

"Ah! she beats us all to-day," remarks the ancient toast of Cheltenham, "in being late," she adds, with a laugh at her little *jeu d'esprit*. "Usually such an early riser, too. I don't remember having ever been up before her. Well, I suppose she's fatigued, poor thing!—quite done up. No wonder, after dancing so much, and with everybody."

"Not everybody, aunt!" says her companion, with a significant emphasis on the everybody. "There was one gentleman she never danced with all the night. Wasn't it a little strange?" This in a whisper and aside.

"Ah! true. You mean Captain Rye-croft?"

"Yes."

"It was a little strange. I observed it myself. She seemed distant with him, and he with her. Have you any idea of the reason, Nelly?"

“ Not in the least. Only I fancy something must have come between them.”

“ The usual thing ; lover’s tiff I suppose. Ah, I’ve seen a great many of them in my time. How silly men and women are—when they’re in love. Are they not, Mr. Musgrave ? ”

The curate answers in the affirmative but somewhat confusedly, and blushing, as he imagines it may be a thrust at himself.

“ Of the two,” proceeds the garrulous spinster, “ men are the most foolish under such circumstances. No ! ” she exclaims, contradicting herself, “ when I think of it, no. I’ve seen ladies, high-born, and with titles, half beside themselves about Beau Brummel, distractedly quarrelling as to which should dance with him ! Beau Brummel, who ended his days in a low lodging-house ! Ha ! ha ! ha ! ”

There is a *soupçon* of spleen in the tone of Miss Linton’s laughter, as though she had herself once felt the fascinations of the redoubtable dandy.

“ What could be more ridiculous ? ” she

goes on. "When one looks back upon it, the very extreme of absurdity. Well;" taking hold of the *cafetière*, and filling her cup, "it's time for that young lady to be downstairs. If she hasn't been lying awake ever since the people went off, she should be well rested by this. Bless me," glancing at the ormolu dial over the mantel, "it's after eleven, Clarisse," to the *femme de chambre*, still in attendance, "tell Miss Wynn's maid to say to her mistress we're waiting breakfast. *Veet, tray veet!*" she concludes, with a pronunciation and accent anything but Parisian.

Off trips the French demoiselle, and upstairs; almost instantly returning down them, Miss Wynn's maid along, with a report which startles the trio at the breakfast table. It is the English damsel who delivers it in the vernacular.

"Miss Gwen isn't in her room; nor hasn't been all the night long."

Miss Linton is in the act of removing the top from a guinea fowl's egg, as the maid makes the announcement. Were it a

bomb bursting between her fingers, the surprise could not be more sudden or complete.

Dropping egg and cup, in stark astonishment, she demands :

“What do you mean, Gibbons?”

Gibbons is the girl’s name.

“Oh, ma’am! Just what I’ve said.”

“Say it again. I can’t believe my ears.”

“That Miss Gwen hasn’t slept in her room.”

“And where has she slept?”

“The goodness only knows.”

“But you ought to know. You’re her maid—you undressed her?”

“I did not—I am sorry to say,” stammered out the girl, confused and self-accused, “very sorry I didn’t.”

“And why didn’t you, Gibbons? explain that.”

Thus brought to book, the peccant Gibbons confesses to what has occurred in all its details. No use concealing aught—it must come out anyhow.

“And you’re quite sure she has not slept

in her room?" interrogates Miss Linton, as yet unable to realise a circumstance so strange and unexpected.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. The bed hasn't been lied upon by anybody—neither sheets or coverlet disturbed. And there's her night-dress over the chair, just as I laid it out for her."

"Very strange," exclaims Miss Linton, "positively alarming."

For all, the old lady is not alarmed yet—at least, not to any great degree. Llangorren Court is a "house of many mansions," and can boast of a half-score spare bedrooms. And she, now its mistress, is a creature of many caprices. Just possible she has indulged in one after the dancing—entered the first sleeping apartment that chanced in her way, flung herself on a bed or sofa in her ball dress, fallen asleep, and is there still slumbering.

"Search them all!" commands Miss Linton, addressing a variety of domestics, whom the ringing of bells has brought around her.

They scatter off in different directions, Miss Lees along with them.

“It’s very extraordinary. Don’t you think so?”

This to the curate, the only one remaining in the room with her.

“I do, decidedly. Surely no harm has happened her. I trust not. How could there?”

“True, how? Still I’m a little apprehensive, and won’t feel satisfied till I see her. How my heart does palpitate, to be sure.”

She lays her spread palm over the cardiac region, with an expression less of pain, than the affectation of it.

“Well, Eleanor,” she calls out to the companion, re-entering the room with Gibbons behind. “What news?”

“Not any, aunt.”

“And you really think she hasn’t slept in her room?”

“Almost sure she hasn’t. The bed, as Gibbons told you, has never been touched, nor the sofa. Besides, the dress she wore last night isn’t there.”

“Nor anywhere else, ma’am,” puts in the maid; about such matters specially intelligent. “As you know, ’twas the sky-blue silk, with blonde lace over-skirt, and flower-de-loose on it. I’ve looked everywhere, and can’t find a thing she had on—not so much as a ribbon!”

The other searchers are now returning in rapid succession, all with a similar tale. No word of the missing one—neither sign nor trace of her.

At length the alarm is serious and real, reaching fever height. Bells ring, and servants are sent in every direction. They go rushing about, no longer confining their search to the sleeping apartments, but extending it to rooms where only lumber has place—to cellars almost unexplored, garrets long unvisited, everywhere. Closet and cupboard doors are drawn open, screens dashed aside, and panels parted, with keen glances sent through the chinks. Just as in the baronial castle, and on that same night when young Lovel lost his “own fair bride.”

And while searching for their young mistress, the domestics of Llangorren Court have the romantic tale in their minds. Not one of them but knows the fine old song of the “Mistletoe Bough.” Male and female—all have heard it sung in that same house, at every Christmas-tide, under the “kissing bush,” where the pale green branch and its waxen berries were conspicuous.

It needs not the mystic memory to stimulate them to zealous exertion. Respect for their young mistress—with many of them almost adoration—is enough; and they search as if for sister, wife, or child according to their feelings and attachments.

In vain—all in vain. Though certain that no “old oak chest” inside the walls of Llangorren Court encloses a form destined to become a skeleton, they cannot find Gwen Wynn. Dead, or living, she is not in the house.

CHAPTER XV.

AGAIN THE ENGAGEMENT RING.

THE first hurried search, with its noisy excitement, proving fruitless, there follows an interregnum calmer with suspended activity. Indeed, Miss Linton directs it so. Now convinced that her niece has really disappeared from the place, she thinks it prudent to deliberate before proceeding further.

She has no thought that the young lady has acted otherwise than of her own will. To suppose her carried off is too absurd—a theory not to be entertained for an instant. And having gone so, the questions are, why and whither? After all, it may be, that at the ball's departing, in the last moment when the guests were departing, moved by a mad prank, she leaped into the carriage of some lady friends, and was whirled home

with them, just in the dress she had been dancing in. With such an impulsive creature as Gwen Wynn, the freak was not improbable. Nor is there any one to say nay. In the bustle and confusion of departure the other domestics were busy with their own affairs, and Gibbons sound asleep.

And if true a "hue and cry" raised and reaching the outside world would at least beget ridicule, if it did not cause absolute scandal. To avoid this the servants are forbidden to go beyond the confines of the Court, or carry any tale outward—for the time.

Beguiled by this hopeful belief, Miss Linton, with the companion assisting, scribbles off a number of notes, addressed to the heads of three or four families in whose houses her niece must have so abruptly elected to take refuge for the night. Merely to ask if such was the case, the question couched in phrase guarded, and as possible suggestive. These are dispatched by trusted messengers, cautioned to silence; Mr. Mus-

grave himself volunteering a round of calls, at other houses, to make personal inquiry.

This matter settled, the old lady waits the result, though without any very sanguine expectations of success. For another theory has presented itself to her mind—that Gwen has run away with Captain Rye-croft !

Improbable as the thing might appear—Miss Linton, nevertheless, for a while has faith in it. It was as she might have done, some forty years before, had she but met the right man—such as he. And measuring her niece by the same romantic standard—with Gwen's capriciousness thrown into the account—she ignores everything else; even the absurdity of such a step from its sheer causelessness. That to her is of little weight; no more the fact of the young lady taking flight in a thin dress, with only a shawl upon her shoulders. For Gibbons called upon to give account of her wardrobe, has taken stock, and found everything in its place—every article of her mistress's drapery save

the blue silk dress and Indian shawl—hats and bonnets hung up, or in their boxes, but all there, proving her to have gone off bareheaded ?

Not the less natural, reasons Miss Linton—instead, only a component part in the chapter of contrarities.

So, too, the coolness observed between the betrothed sweethearts throughout the preceding night—their refraining from partnership in the dances—all dissembling on their part, possibly to make the surprise of the after event more piquant and complete.

So runs the imagination of the novel-reading spinster, fresh and fervid as in her days of girlhood—passing beyond the trammels of reason—leaving the bounds of probability.

But her new theory is short lived. It receives a death blow from a letter which Miss Lees brings under her notice. It is that superscribed in the handwriting of Captain Ryecroft, which the companion had for the time forgotten ; she having no

thought that it would have anything to do with the young lady's disappearance. And the letter proves that he can have nothing to do with it. The hotel stamp, the post-mark, the time of deposit and delivery are all understood, all contributing to show it must have been posted, if not written, that same morning. Were she with him it would not be there.

Down goes the castle of romance Miss Linton has been constructing—wrecked—scattered as a house of cards.

It is quite possible that letter contains something that would throw light upon the mystery, perhaps clear all up; and the old lady would like to open it. But she may not, dare not. Gwen Wynn is not one to allow tampering with her correspondence; and as yet her aunt cannot realise the fact—nor even entertain the supposition—that she is gone for good and for ever.

As time passes, however, and the different messengers return, with no news of the missing lady—Mr. Musgrave is also back

without tidings—the alarm is renewed, and search again set up. It extends beyond the precincts of the house, and the grounds already explored, off into woods and fields, along the banks of river and byewash, everywhere that offers a likelihood, the slightest, of success. But neither in wood, spinney, or coppice can they find traces of Gwen Wynn; all “draw blank,” as George Shenstone would say of a cover where no fox is found.

And just as this result is reached, that gentleman himself steps upon the ground, to receive a shock such as he has rarely experienced. The news communicated is a surprise to him; for he has arrived at the Court, knowing nought of the strange incident which has occurred. He has come thither on an afternoon call, not altogether dictated by ceremony. Despite all that has passed—what Gwen Wynn told him, what she showed holding up her hand—he does not even yet despair. Who so circumstanced ever does? What man in love, profoundly, passionately as he, could believe

his last chance eliminated; or have his ultimate hope extinguished? He had not. Instead, when bidding adieu to her, after the ball, he felt some revival of it, several causes having contributed to its rekindling. Among others, her gracious behaviour to himself, so gratifying; but more, her distant manner towards his rival, which he could not help observing, and saw with secret satisfaction.

And still thus reflecting on it, he enters the gates at Llangorren, to be stunned by the strange intelligence there awaiting him—Miss Wynn missing! gone away! run away! perhaps carried off! lost, and cannot be found! For in these varied forms, and like variety of voices, is it conveyed to him.

Needless to say, he joins in the search with ardour, but distractedly; suffering all the sadness of a torn and harrowed heart. But to no purpose; no result to soothe or console him. His skill at drawing a cover is of no service here. It is not for a fox “stole away,” leaving hot scent behind;

but a woman goes without print of foot or trace to indicate the direction; without word left to tell the cause of departure.

Withal, George Shenstone continues to seek for her long after the others have desisted. For his views differ from those entertained by Miss Linton, and his apprehensions are of a keener nature. He remains at the Court throughout the evening, making excursions into the adjacent woods, searching, and again exploring everywhere. None of the servants think it strange; all know of his intimate relations with the family.

Mr. Musgrave remains also; both of them asked to stay dinner—a meal this day eaten *sans façon*, in haste, and under agitation.

When, after it, the ladies retire to the drawing-room—the curate along with them—George Shenstone goes out again, and over the grounds. It is now night, and the darkness lures him on; for it was in such she disappeared. And although he has no expectation of seeing her there, some vague thought has drifted into his

mind, that in darkness he may better reflect, and something be suggested to avail him.

He strays on to the boat stair, looks down into the dock, and there sees the *Gwendoline* at her moorings. But he thinks only of the other boat, which, as he now knows, on the night before lay alongside her. Has it indeed carried away Gwen Wynn? He fancies it has—he can hardly have a doubt of it. How else is her disappearance to be accounted for? But has she been borne off by force, or went she willingly? These are the questions which perplex him; the conjectured answer to either causing him keenest anxiety.

After remaining a short while on the top of the stair, he turns away with a sigh, and saunters on towards the pavilion. Though under the shadow of its roof the obscurity is complete, he, nevertheless, enters and sits down. He is fatigued with the exertions of the afternoon, and the strain upon his nerves through the excitement.

Taking a cigar from his case and nipping

off the end, he rasps a fusee to light it. But, before the blue fizzing blaze dims down he drops the cigar—to clutch at an object on the floor, whose sparkle has caught his eye. He succeeds in getting hold of it, though not till the fusee has ceased flaming. But he needs no light to tell him what he has in his hand. He knows it is that which so pained him to see on one of Gwen Wynn's fingers—the engagement ring!

CHAPTER XVI.

A MYSTERIOUS EMBARKATION.

Not in vain had the green woodpecker given out its warning note. As Jack Wingate predicted from it, soon after came a downpour of rain. It was raining as Captain Ryecroft returned to his hotel, as at intervals throughout that day ; and now on the succeeding night it is again sluicing down as from a shower bath. The river is in full flood, its hundreds of affluents from Plinlimmon downward, having each contributed its quota, till Vaga, usually so pure, limpid, and tranquil, rolls on in vast turbulent volume, muddy and maddened. There is a strong wind as well, whose gusts now and then, striking the water's surface, lash it into furrows with white frothy crests.

On the Wye this night there would be danger for any boat badly manned or unskilfully steered. And yet a boat is about to embark upon it; one which throughout the afternoon has been lying moored in a little branch stream that runs in opposite the lands of Llangorren, a tributary supplied by the dingle in which stands the dwelling of Richard Dempsey. It is the same near whose mouth the poacher and the priest were seen by Gwen Wynn and Eleanor Lees on the day of their remarkable adventure with the forest roughs. And almost in the same spot is the craft now spoken of; no coracle, however, but a regular pair-oared boat of a kind in common use among Wye watermen.

It is lying with bow to the bank, its painter attached to a tree, whose branches extend over it. During the day no one has been near it, and it is not likely that any one has observed it. Some little distance up the brook, and drawn well in under the spreading boughs, that almost touching the water, darkly shadow the surface, it is not

visible from the river's channel: while, along the edge of the rivulet, there is no thoroughfare, nor path of any kind. No more a landing-place where boat is accustomed to put in or remain at moorings. That now there has evidently been brought thither for some temporary purpose.

Not till after the going down of the sun is this declared. Then, just as the purple of twilight is changing to the inky blackness of night, and another dash of rain clatters on the already saturated foliage three men are seen moving among the trees that grow thick along the streamlet's edge. They seem not to mind it, although pouring down in torrents; for they have come through the dell, as from Dempsey's house, and are going in the direction of the boat, where there is no shelter. But if they regard not getting wet,—something they do regard; else why should they observe such caution in their movements, and talk in subdued voices? All the more strange this, in a place where there is so little likelihood of their being overheard,

or encountering any one to take note of their proceedings.

It is only between two of them that conversation is carried on; the third walking far in advance, beyond earshot of speech in the ordinary tone; besides, the noise of the tempest would hinder his hearing them. Therefore, it cannot be on his account they converse guardedly. More likely their constraint is due to the solemnity of the subject; for solemn it is, as their words show.

“They’ll be sure to find the body in a day or two. Possibly to-morrow, or if not, very soon. A good deal will depend on the state of the river. If this flood continue and the water remain discoloured as now, it may be several days before they light on it. No matter when; your course is clear, Monsieur Murdock.”

“But what do you advise my doing, *Père*? I’d like you to lend me your counsel—give me minute directions about everything.”

“In the first place, then, you must show yourself on the other side of the water, and

take an active part in the search. Such a near relative, as you are, 'twould appear strange if you didn't. All the world may not be aware of the little tiff—rather prolonged though—that's been between you. And if it were, your keeping away on such an occasion would give cause for greater scandal. Spite so rancorous! that of itself should excite curious thoughts—suspicions. Naturally enough. A man, whose own cousin is mysteriously missing, not caring to know what has become of her! And when knowing—when 'Found drowned,' as she will be—not to show either sympathy or sorrow! *Ma foi!* they might mob you if you didn't!"

"That's true enough," grunts Murdock, thinking of the respect in which his cousin is held, and her great popularity throughout the neighbourhood.

"You advise my going over to Llangorren?"

"Decidedly, I do. Present yourself there to-morrow, without fail. You may make the hour reasonably late; saying that

the sinister intelligence has only just reached you at Glyngog—out of the way as it is. You'll find plenty of people at the Court on your arrival. From what I've learnt this afternoon, through my informant resident there, they'll be hot upon the search to-morrow. It would have been more earnest to-day, but for that quaint old creature with her romantic notions; the latest of them, as Clarisse tell me, that Mademoiselle had run away with the Hussar! But it appears a letter has reached the Court in his handwriting, which put a different construction on the affair; proving to them it could be no elopement—at least with him. Under these circumstances, then, to-morrow morning, soon as the sun is up, there'll be a hue and cry all over the country; so loud you couldn't fail to hear, and will be expected to have a voice in it. To do that effectually you must show yourself at Llangorren, and in good time."

"There's sense in what you say. You're a very Solomon, Father Rogier. I'll be

there, trust me. Is there anything else you think of."

The Jesuit is for a time silent, apparently in deep thought. It is a ticklish game the two are playing, and needs careful consideration, with cautious action.

"Yes," he at length answers. "There are a good many other things, I think of. But they depend upon circumstances not yet developed by which you will have to be guided. And you must guide yourself, M'ssieu, as you best can. It will be quite four days, if not more, ere I can get back. They may even find the body to-morrow—if they should think of employing drags, or other searching apparatus. Still, I fancy, 'twill be some time before they come to a final belief in her being drowned. Don't you, on any account suggest it. And should there be such search, endeavour, in a quiet way, to have it conducted in any direction but the right one. The longer before fishing the thing up, the better it will be for our purposes: you comprehend?"

“I do.”

“When found, as it must be in time, you will know how to show becoming grief; and, if opportunity offer, you may throw out a hint, having reference to *Le Capitaine Ryecroft*. His having gone away from his hotel this morning, no one knows why or whither—decamping in such haste too—that will be sure to fix suspicion upon him—possibly have him pursued and arrested as the murderer of Miss Wynn! Odd succession of events, is it not?”

“It is indeed.”

“Seems as if the very Fates were in a conspiracy to favour our design. If we fail now, 'twill be our own fault. And that reminds me there should be no waste of time—must not. One hour of this darkness may be worth an age—or at all events ten thousand pounds per annum. *Allons! vite-vite?*”

He steps briskly onward, drawing his caped cloak closer to protect him from the rain, now running in rivers down the drooping branches of the trees.

Murdock follows ; and the two, delayed by a dialogue of such grave character, draw closer to the third who had gone ahead. They do not overtake him, however, till after he has reached the boat, and therein deposited a bundle he has been bearing—of weight sufficient to make him stagger, where the ground was rough and uneven. It is a package of irregular oblong shape, and such size, that laid along the boat's bottom timbers it occupies most part of the space forward of the mid-thwart.

Seeing that he who has thus disposed of it, is Coracle Dick, one might believe it poached salmon, or land game now in season in the act of being transported to some receiver of such commodities. But the words spoken by the priest as he comes up forbid this belief : they are an interrogatory :—

“ Well, *mon braconier* ; have you stowed my luggage ? ”

“ It's in the boat, Father Rogier.”

“ And all ready for starting ? ”

“The minute your reverence steps in.”

“So, well ! And now, M’ssieu,” he adds, turning to Murdock, and again speaking in undertone, “if you play *your* part skilfully, on return I may find you in a fair way of getting installed as the Lord of Llangorren. Till then, adieu !”

Saying which he steps over the boat’s side, and takes seat in its stern.

Shoved off by sinewy arms, it goes brushing out from under the branches, and is rapidly drifted down towards the river.

Lewin Murdock is left standing on the brook’s edge, free to go what way he wishes.

Soon he starts off, not on return to the empty domicile of the poacher, nor yet direct to his own home : but first to the Welsh Harp—there to gather the gossip of the day, and learn whether the startling tale, soon to be told, has yet reached Rugg’s Ferry.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN ANXIOUS WIFE.

INSIDE Glyngog House is Mrs. Murdock, alone, or with only the two female domestics. But these are back in the kitchen while the *ex-cocotte* is moving about in front at intervals opening the door, and gazing out into the night. A dark stormy one; for it is the same in which has occurred the mysterious embarkation of Father Rogier, only an hour later.

To her no mystery; she knows whither the priest is bound, and on what errand. It is not him therefore she is expecting, but her husband to bring home word that her countryman has made a safe start. So anxiously does she await this intelligence, that, after a time, she stays altogether on the door step, regardless of the raw night, and a fire in the drawing-room which blazes

brightly. There is another in the dining-room, and a table profusely spread—set out for supper with dishes of many kinds—cold ham and tongue, fowl and game, flanked by decanters of different wines sparkling attractively.

Whence all this plenty, within walls where of late and for so long, has been such scarcity?

As no one visits at Glyngog save Father Rogier, there is no one but he to ask the question. And he would not, were he there; knowing the answer, better than anyone else. He ought. The cheer upon Lewin Murdock's table, with a cheerfulness observable on Mrs. Murdock's face, are due to the same cause, by himself brought about, or to which he has largely contributed. As Moses lends money on *post obits*, at "shixty per shent," with other expectations, a stream of that leaven has found its way into the ancient manor-house of Glyngog, conducted thither by Gregoire Rogier, who has drawn it from a source of supply provided for such eventualities, and

seemingly inexhaustible—the treasury of the Vatican.

Yet only a tiny rivulet of silver, but soon, if all goes well, to become a flood of gold grand and yellow as that in the Wye itself, having something to do with the waters of this same stream.

No wonder there is now brightness upon the face of Olympe Renault, so long shadowed. The sun of prosperity is again to shine upon the path of her life. Splendour, gaiety, *volupté*, be hers once more, and more than ever !

As she stands in the door of Glyngog, looking down the river, at Llangorren, and through the darkness sees the Court with only one or two windows alight—they but in dim glimmer—she reflects less on how they blazed the night before, with lamps over the lawn like constellations of stars, than how they will flame hereafter, and ere long—when she herself be the ruling spirit and mistress of that mansion.

But as the time passes and no husband home, a cloud steals over her features.

From being only impatient, she becomes nervously anxious. Still standing in the door she listens for footsteps she has oft heard making approach unsteadily, little caring. Not so to-night. She dreads to see him return intoxicated. Though not with any solicitude of the ordinary woman's kind, but for reasons purely prudential. These are manifested in her muttered soliloquy:—

“Gregoire must have got off long ere this—at least two hours ago. He said they'd set out soon as it came night. Half an hour was enough for my husband to return up the meadows home. If he has gone to the Ferry first, and sets to drinking in the Harp? *Cette auberge maudit.* There's no knowing what he may do, or say. Saying would be worse than doing. A word in his cups—a hint of what has happened—might undo everything: draw danger upon us all! And such danger—*l'prise de corps, mon dieu!*

Her cheek blanches at thought of the ugly spectres thus conjured up.

"Surely he will not be so stupid—so insane? Sober he can keep secrets well enough—guard them closely, like most of his countrymen. But the Cognac? Hark Footsteps! His I hope."

She listens without stirring from the spot. The tread is heavy, with now and then a loud stroke against stones. Were her husband a Frenchman it would be different. But Lewin Murdock, like all English country gentlemen, affects substantial foot gear; and the step is undoubtedly his. Not as usual however; to-night firm and regular, telling him to be sober!

"He isn't such a fool after all!"

Her reflection followed by the inquiry, called out—

"*C'est vous, mon mari?*"

"Of course it is. Who else could it be? You don't expect the Father, our only visitor, to-night? You'll not see him for several days to come."

"He's gone then?"

"Two hours ago. By this he should be miles away; unless he and Coracle have

had a capsized, and been spilled out of their boat. No unlikely occurrence with the river running so madly."

She still shows unsatisfied, though not from any apprehension of the boat's being upset. She is thinking of what may have happened at the Welsh Harp; for the long interval, since the priest's departure, her husband could only have been there. She is less anxious however, seeing the state in which he presents himself; so unusual coming from the "*auberge maudite*."

"Two hours ago they got off, you say?"

"About that; just as it was dark enough to set out with safety, and no chance of being observed."

"They did so?"

"Oh, yes."

"*Le bagage bien arrangé?*"

"*Parfaitment*; or as we say in English, neat as a trivet. If you prefer another form; nice as ninepence."

She is pleased at his facetiousness, quite a new mode for Lewin Murdock. Coupled with his sobriety, it gives her confidence

that things have gone on smoothly, and will to the end. Indeed, for some days Murdock has been a new man—acting as one with some grave affair on his hands—feat to accomplish, or negotiation to effect—resolved on carrying it to completeness.

Now, less from anxiety as to what he has been saying at the Welsh Harp, than to know what he has there heard said by others, she further interrogates him:—

“Where have you been meanwhile, monsieur?”

“Part of the time at the Ferry; the rest of it I’ve spent on paths and roads coming and going. I went up to the Harp to hear what I could hear.”

“And what did you hear?”

“Nothing much to interest us. As you know, Rugg’s is an out of the way corner—none more so on the Wye—and the Llangorren news hasn’t reached it. The talk of the Ferry folk is all about the occurrence at Abergann, which still continues to exercise them. The other don’t appear to have got much abroad, if at all,

anywhere—for reasons told Father Rogier by your countrywoman, Clarisse, with whom he held an interview sometime during the afternoon.”

“And has there been no search yet?”

“Search, yes; but nothing found, and not much noise made, for the reasons I allude to.”

“What are they? You haven’t told me.”

“Oh! various. Some of them laughable enough. Whimsies of that Quixotic old lady who has been so long doing the honours at Llangorren.”

“Ah! Madame Linton. How has she been taking it?”

“I’ll tell you after I’ve had something to eat and drink. You forget, Olympe, where I’ve been all the day long—under the roof of a poacher, who, of late otherwise employed, hadn’t so much as a head of game in his house. True, I’ve since made call at an hotel, but you don’t give me credit for my abstemiousness! What have you got to reward me for it?”

“ *Entrez !* ” she exclaims, leading him into the dining-room, their dialogue so far having been carried on in the porch. “ *Voilà !* ”

He is gratified, though no ways surprised at the set out. He does not need to inquire whence it comes. He, too, knows it is a sacrifice to the rising sun. But he knows also what a sacrifice he will have to make in return for it—one third the estate of Llangorren.

“ Well, *ma chérie*, ” he says, as this reflection occurs to him, “ we’ll have to pay pretty dear for all this. But I suppose there’s no help for it.”

“ None, ” she answers with a comprehension of the circumstances—clearer and fuller than his. “ We’ve made the contract, and must abide by it. If broken by us, it wouldn’t be a question of property, but life. Neither yours nor mine would be safe for a single hour. Ah monsieur ! you little comprehend the power of those gentry, *les Jesuites*—how sharp their claws, and far reaching ! ”

“Confound them!” he exclaims, angrily dropping down upon a chair by the table’s side.

He eats ravenously, and drinks like a fish. His day’s work is over, and he can afford the indulgence.

And while they are at supper, he imparts all details of what he has done and heard ; among them Miss Linton’s reasons for having put restraint upon the search.

“The old simpleton!” he says, concluding his narration, “she actually believed my cousin to have run away with that captain of Hussars—if she don’t believe it still! Ha, ha, ha. She’ll think differently when she sees that body brought out of the water. *It will settle the business!*”

Olympe Renault, retiring to rest, is long kept awake by the pleasant thought, not that for many more nights will she have to sleep in a mean bed at Glyngog, but on a grand couch in Llangorren Court.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IMPATIENT FOR THE POST.

NEVER man looked with more impatience for a post, than Captain Ryecroft for the night mail from the West, its morning delivery in London. It may bring him a letter, on the contents of which will turn the hinges of his life's fate, assuring his happiness or dooming him to misery. And if no letter come, its failure will make misery for him all the same.

It is scarce necessary to say, the epistle thus expected, and fraught with such grave consequence, is an answer to his own; that written in Herefordshire, and posted before leaving the Wye-side Hotel. Twenty-four hours have since elapsed; and now, on the morning after, he is at the Langham, London, where the response, if any, should reach him.

He has made himself acquainted with the statistics of postal time, telling him when the night mail is due, and when the first distribution of letters in the metropolitan district. At earliest in the Langham, which has post and telegraph office within its own walls, this palatial hostelry, unrivalled for convenience, being in direct communication with all parts of the world.

It is on the stroke of 8 A.M., and, the ex-Hussar-officer pacing the tessellated tiles, outside the deputy-manager's moderately-sized room with its front glass-protected, watches for the incoming of the post-carrier.

It seems an inexorable certainty—though a very vexatious one—that person, or thing, awaited with unusual impatience, must needs be behind time—as if to punish the moral delinquency of the impatient one. Even postmen are not always punctual, as Vivian Ryecroft has reason to know. That amiable and active individual in coatee of coarse cloth, with red rag facings, flitting from door to door, brisk as a blue-bottle,

on this particular morning does not step across the threshold of the Langham till nearly half-past eight. There is a thick fog, and the street flags are "greasy." That would be the excuse for his tardy appearance, were he called upon to give one.

Dumping down his sack, and spilling its contents upon the lead-covered sill of the booking-office window, he is off again on a fresh and further flight.

With no abatement of impatience Captain Ryecroft stands looking at the letters being sorted—a miscellaneous lot, bearing the post marks of many towns and many countries, with the stamps of nearly every civilized nation on the globe; enough of them to make the eyes of an ardent stamp collector shed tears of concupiscence.

Scarcely allowing the sorter time to deposit them in their respective pigeon holes, Ryecroft approaches and asks if there be any for him—at the same time giving his name.

"No, not any," answers the clerk, after

drawing out all under letter R, and dealing them off as a pack of cards.

“Are you quite sure, sir? Pardon me. I intend starting off within the hour, and expecting a letter of some importance, may I ask you to glance over them again?”

In all the world there are no officials more affable than those of the Langham. They are in fact types of the highest *hotel civilization*. Instead of showing nettled, he thus appealed to makes assenting rejoinder, accompanying his words with a re-examination of the letters under R; soon as completed saying,—

“No, sir; none for the name of Rye-croft.”

He bearing this name turns away, with an air of more than disappointment. The negative denoting that no letter had been written in reply, vexes—almost irritates him. It is like a blow repeated—a second slap in his face held up in humiliation—after having forgiven the first. He will not so humble himself—never forgive again. This

his resolve as he ascends the great stairway to his room, once more to make ready for travel.

The steam-packet service between Folkestone and Boulogne is "tidal." Consulting Bradshaw, he finds the boat on that day leaves the former place at 4 P.M.; the connecting train from the Charing Cross station, 1. Therefore have several hours to be put in meanwhile.

How are they to be occupied? He is not in the mood for amusement. Nothing in London could give him that now—neither afford him a moment's gratification.

Perhaps in Paris? And he will try. There men have buried their griefs—women as well: too oft laying in the same grave their innocence, honour, and reputation. In the days of Napoleon the Little, a grand cemetery of such; hosts entering it pure and stainless, to become tainted as the Imperial *regime* itself.

And he, too, may succumb to its influence, sinister as hell itself. In his present

frame of mind it is possible. Nor would his be the first noble spirit broken down, wrecked on the reef of a disappointed passion—love thwarted, the loved one never again to be spoken to, in all likelihood never more met!

While waiting for the Folkestone train, he is a prey to the most harrowing reflections, and in hope of escaping them, descends to the billiard-room—in the Langham a well-appointed affair, with tables the very best.

The marker accommodates him to a hundred up, which he loses. It is not for that he drops the cue disheartened, and retires. Had he won, with Cook, Bennett, or Roberts as his adversary, 'twould have been all the same.

Once more mounting to his room, he makes an appeal to the ever-friendly Nicotian. A cigar, backed by a glass of brandy, may do something to soothe his chafed spirit; and lighting the one, he rings for the other. This brought him, he takes seat by the window, throws up the sash, and looks down upon the street. There to see

what gives him a fresh spasm of pain ; though to two others, affording the highest happiness on earth. For it is a wedding ceremony being celebrated at " All Souls " opposite, a church before whose altar many fashionable couples join hands to be linked together for life. Such a couple is in the act of entering the sacred edifice ; carriages drawing up and off in quick succession, coachmen with white rosettes and whips ribbon-bedecked, footmen wearing similar favours—an unusually stylish affair.

As in shining and with smiling faces, the bridal train ascends the steps two by two disappearing within the portals of the church, the spectators on the nave and around the enclosure rails also looking joyous, as though each—even the raggedest—had a personal interest in the event, from the window opposite, Captain Ryecroft observes it with very different feelings. For the thought is before his mind, how near he has been himself to making one in such a procession—at its head—followed by the bitter reflection, he now never shall.

A sigh, succeeded by a half angry ejaculation; then the bell rung with a violence which betrays how the sight has agitated him.

On the waiter entering, he cries out,—

“Call me a cab.”

“Hansom, sir?”

“No! four-wheeler. And this luggage; get down stairs soon as possible.”

His impediments are all in travelling trim—but a few necessary articles having been unpacked, and a shilling tossed upon the strapped portmanteau ensures it, with the lot, speedy descent down the lift.

A single pipe of Mr. Trafford's silver whistle brings a cab to the Langham entrance in twenty seconds time; and in twenty more a traveller's luggage however heavy is slung to the top, with the lighter articles stowed inside.

His departure so accelerated, Captain Ryecroft—who had already settled his bill—is soon seated in the cab, and carried off.

But despatch ends on leaving the Langham. The cab being a four-wheeler crawls

along like a tortoise. Fortunately for the fare he is in no haste now ; instead will be too early for the Folkestone train. He only wanted to get away from the scene of that ceremony, so disagreeably suggestive.

Shut up, imprisoned, in the plush-lined vehicle, shabby, and not over clean, he endeavours to beguile time by gazing out at the shop windows. The hour is too early for Regent Street promenaders. Some distraction, if not amusement, he derives from his "cabby's" arms ; these working to and fro as if the man were rowing a boat. In burlesque it reminds him of the Wye, and his waterman Wingate !

But just then something else recalls the western river, not ludicrously, but with another twinge of pain. The cab is passing through Leicester Square, one of the lungs of London, long diseased, and in process of being doctored. It is beset with hoardings, plastered against which are huge posters of the advertising kind. Several of them catch the eye of Captain Ryecroft, but only one holds it, causing him the sen-

sation described. It is the announcement of a grand concert to be given at the St. James's Hall, for some charitable purpose of Welsh speciality. Programme with list of performers. At their head in largest lettering the queen of the eisteddfod

EDITH WYNNE!

To him in the cab now a name of galling reminiscence, notwithstanding the difference of orthography. It seems like a Nemesis pursuing him!

He grasps the leathern strap, and letting down the ill-fitting sash with a clatter, cries out to the cabman,—

“Drive on, Jarvey, or I'll be late for my train! A shilling extra for time.”

If cabby's arms sparred slowly before, they now work as though he were engaged in catching flies; and with their quickened action, aided by several cuts of a thick-thonged whip, the Rosinante goes rattling through the narrow defile of Heming's Row, down King William Street, and across the Strand into the Charing Cross station.

CHAPTER XIX.

JOURNEY INTERRUPTED.

CAPTAIN RYECROFT takes a through ticket for Paris, without thought of breaking journey, and in due time reaches Boulogne. Glad to get out of the detestable packet, little better than a ferry-boat, which plies between Folkestone and the French seaport, he loses not a moment in scaling the equally detestable gang-ladder by which alone he can escape.

Having set foot upon French soil, represented by a rough cobble-stone pavement, he bethinks of passport and luggage—how he will get the former *vised* and the latter looked after with the least trouble to himself. It is not his first visit to France, nor is he unacquainted with that country's customs; therefore knows that a "tip" to *sergent de ville* or *douanier* will clear away

the obstructions in the shortest possible time—quicker if it be a handsome one. Feeling in his pockets for a florin or a half-crown, he is accosted by a voice familiar and of friendly tone.

“Captain Ryecroft!” it exclaims in a rich rolling brogue, as of Galway. “Is it yourself? By the powers of Moll Kelly, and it is.”

“Major Mahon!”

“That same, old boy. Give us a grip of your fist, as on that night when you pulled me out of the ditch at Delhi, just in time to clear the bayonets of the pandys. A nate thing, and a close shave, wasn’t it? But’s what brought you to Boulogne?”

The question takes the traveller aback. He is not prepared to explain the nature of his journey, and with a view to evasion he simply points to the steamer, out of which the passengers are still swarming.

“Come, old comrade!” protests the Major, good-naturedly, “that won’t do; it isn’t satisfactory for bosom friends, as we’ve been, and still are, I trust. But,

maybe, I make too free, asking your business in Boulogne ? ”

“ Not at all, Mahon. I have no business in Boulogne ; I’m on the way to Paris.”

“ Oh ! a pleasure trip, I suppose.”

“ Nothing of the kind. There’s no pleasure for me in Paris or anywhere else.”

“ Aha ! ” ejaculated the Major, struck by the words, and their despondent tone, “ what’s this, old fellow ? Something wrong ? ”

“ Oh, not much—never mind.”

The reply is little satisfactory. But seeing that further allusion to private matters might not be agreeable, the Major continues, apologetically—

“ Pardon me, Ryecroft. I’ve no wish to be inquisitive ; but you have given me reason to think you out of sorts, somehow. It isn’t your fashion to be low-spirited, and you shan’t be, so long as you’re in my company—if I can help it.”

“ It’s very kind of you, Mahon ; and for the short time I’m to be with you I’ll do the best I can to be cheerful. It shouldn’t

be a great effort. I suppose the train will be starting in a few minutes?"

"What train?"

"For Paris."

"You're not going to Paris now—not this night?"

"I am, straight on."

"Neither straight nor crooked, *ma bohil!*"

"I must."

"Why must you? If you don't expect pleasure there, for what should you be in such haste to reach it? Bother, Ryecroft! you'll break your journey here, and stay a few days with me? I can promise you some little amusement. Boulogne isn't such a dull place just now. The smash of Agra and Masterman's, with Overend and Gurney following suite, has sent hither a host of old Indians, both soldiers and civilians. No doubt you'll find many friends among them. There are lots of pretty girls, too—I don't mean natives, but our countrywomen—to whom I'll have much pleasure in presenting you."

"Not for the world, Mahon—not one!

I have no desire to extend my acquaintance in that way."

"What, turned hater, women too. Well, leaving the fair sex on one side, there's half a dozen of the other here—good fellows as ever stretched legs on mahogany. They're strangers to you, I think; but will be delighted to know you, and do their best to make Boulogne agreeable. Come, old boy. You'll stay? Say the word."

"I would, Major, and with pleasure, were it any other time. But, I confess, just now I'm not in the mood for making new acquaintance—least of all among my countrymen.—To tell the truth, I'm going to Paris chiefly with a view of avoiding them."

"Nonsense! You're not the man to turn *solitaire*, like Simon Stylites, and spend the rest of your days on the top of a stone pillar! Besides, Paris is not the place for that sort of thing. If you're really determined on keeping out of company for awhile—I won't ask why—remain with me, and we'll take strolls along the sea beach,

pick up pebbles, gather shells, and make love to mermaids, or the Boulognese fish-fags, if you prefer it. Come, Ryecroft, don't deny me. It's so long since we've had a day together, I'm dying to talk over old times—recall our *camaraderie* in India."

For the first time in forty-eight hours Captain Ryecroft's countenance shows an indication of cheerfulness—almost to a smile, as he listens to the rattle of his jovial friend, all the pleasanter from its *patois* recalling childhood's happy days. And as some prospect of distraction from his sad thoughts—if not a restoration of happiness—is held out by the kindly invitation, he is half inclined to accept it. What difference whether he find the grave of his griefs in Paris or Boulogne—if find it he can?

"I'm booked to Paris," he says mechanically, and as if speaking to himself.

"Have you a through ticket?" asks the Major, in an odd way.

"Of course I have."

"Let me have a squint at it?" further

questions the other, holding out his hand.

“Certainly. Why do you wish that?”

“To see if it will allow you to shunt yourself here.”

“I don’t think it will. In fact, I know it don’t. They told me so at Charing Cross.”

“Then they told you what wasn’t true. For it does. See here!”

What the Major calls upon him to look at are some bits of pasteboard, like butterflies, fluttering in the air, and settling down over the copingstone of the dock. They are the fragments of the torn ticket.

“Now, old boy! You’re booked for Boulogne.”

The melancholy smile, up to that time on Ryecroft’s face, broadens into a laugh at the stratagem employed to detain him. With cheerfulness for the time restored, he says:

“Well, Major, by that you’ve cost me at least one pound sterling. But I’ll make you recoup it in boarding and lodging me for—possibly a week.”

“A month—a year, if you should like your lodgings and will stay in them. I’ve got a snug little compound in the Rue Tintelleries, with room to swing hammocks for us both; besides a bin or two of wine, and, what’s better, a keg of the ‘raal crayther.’ Let’s along and have a tumbler of it at once. You’ll need it to wash the channel spray out of your throat. Don’t wait for your luggage. These Custom-house gentry all know me, and will send it directly after. Is it labelled?”

“It is; my name’s on everything.”

“Let me have one of your cards.” The card is handed to him. “There, Monsieur,” he says, turning to a *douanier*, who respectfully salutes, “take this, and see that all the *baggage* bearing the name on it be kept safely till called for. My servant will come for it. *Garçon!*” This to the driver of a *voiture*, who, for some time viewing them with expectant eye, makes response by a cut of his whip, and brisk approach to the spot where they are standing.

Pushing Captain Ryecroft into the hack, and following himself, the Major gives the French Jehu his address, and they are driven off over the rough, rib-cracking cobbles of Boulogne.

CHAPTER XX.

HUE AND CRY.

THE ponies and pet stag on the lawn at Llangorren wonder what it is all about. So different from the garden parties and archery meetings, of which they have witnessed many a one! Unlike the latter in their quiet stateliness is the excited crowd at the Court this day; still more, from its being chiefly composed of men. There are a few women, also, but not the slender-waisted creatures, in silks and gossamer muslins, who make up an out-door assemblage of the aristocracy. The sturdy dames and robust damsels now rambling over its grounds and gravelled walks are the dwellers in roadside cottages, who at the words "Murdered or Missing," drop brooms upon half-swept floors, leave babies uncared-for in their cradles, and are off to the indicated spot.

And such words have gone abroad from Llangorren Court, coupled with the name of its young mistress. Gwen Wynn is missing, if she be not also murdered.

It is the second day after her disappearance, as known to the household; and now it is known throughout the neighbourhood, near and far. The slight scandal dreaded by Miss Linton no longer has influence with her. The continued absence of her niece, with the certainty at length reached that she is not in the house of any neighbouring friend, would make concealment of the matter a grave scandal in itself. Besides, since the half-hearted search of yesterday new facts have come to light; for one, the finding of that ring on the floor of the pavilion. It has been identified not only by the finder, but by Eleanor Lees and Miss Linton herself. A rare cluster of brilliants, besides of value, it has more than once received the inspection of these ladies—both knowing the giver, as the nature of the gift.

How comes it to have been there in the

summer-house? Dropped, of course; but under what circumstances?

Questions perplexing, while the thing itself seriously heightens the alarm. No one, however rich or regardless, would fling such precious stones away; above all, gems so bestowed, and, as Miss Lees has reason to know, prized and fondly treasured.

The discovery of the engagement ring deepens the mystery instead of doing aught towards its elucidation. But it also strengthens a suspicion, fast becoming belief, that Miss Wynn went not away of her own accord; instead, has been taken.

Robbed, too, before being carried off. There were other rings upon her fingers—diamonds, emeralds, and the like. Possibly in the scramble, on the robbers first seizing hold and hastily stripping her, this particular one had slipped through their fingers, fallen to the floor, and so escaped observation. At night and in the darkness, all likely enough.

So for a time run the surmises, despite

the horrible suggestion attaching to them, almost as a consequence. For if Gwen Wynn had been robbed she may also be murdered. The costly jewels she wore, in rings, bracelets, and chains, worth many hundreds of pounds, may have been the temptation to plunder her; but the plunderers identified, and fearing punishment, would also make away with her person. It may be abduction, but it has now more the look of murder.

By midday the alarm has reached its height—the hue and cry is at its loudest. No longer confined to the family and domestics—no more the relatives and intimate friends—people of all classes and kinds take part in it. The pleasure grounds of Llangorren, erst private and sacred as the Garden of the Hesperides, are now trampled by heavy, hobnailed shoes; while men in smocks, slops, and sheepskin gaiters, stride excitedly to and fro, or stand in groups, all wearing the same expression on their features—that of a sincere, honest anxiety, with a fear some sinister mischance

has overtaken Miss Wynn. Many a young farmer is there who has ridden beside her in the hunting field, often behind her noways nettled by her giving him the "lead;" instead, admiring her courage and style of taking fences over which, on his cart nag, he dares not follow—enthusiastically proclaiming her "pluck" at markets, race meetings, and other gatherings wherever came up talk of "Tally-ho."

Besides those on the ground drawn thither by sympathetic friendship, and others the idly curious, still others are there in the exercise of official duty. Several magistrates have arrived at Llangorren, among them Sir George Shenstone, chairman of the district bench; the police superintendent also, with several of his blue-coated subordinates.

There is a man present about whom remark is made, and who attracts more attention than either justice of the peace or policeman. It is a circumstance unprecedented—a strange sight, indeed—Lewin Murdock at the Court! He is there, never-

theless, taking an active part in the proceedings.

It seems natural enough to those who but know him to be the cousin of the missing lady, ignorant of the long family estrangement. Only to intimate friends is there aught singular in his behaving as he now does. But to these, on reflection, his behaviour is quite comprehensible. They construe it differently from the others—the outside spectators. More than one of them, observing the anxious expression upon his face, believe it but a semblance—a mask to hide the satisfaction within his heart—to become joy if Gwen Wynn be found—dead.

It is not a thing to be spoken of openly, and no one so speaks of it. The construction put upon Lewin Murdock's motives is confined to the few; for only a few know how much he is interested in the upshot of that search.

Again it is set on foot, but not as on the day preceding. Now no mad rushing to and fro of mere physical demonstration. This day there is due deliberation; a coun-

cil held, composed of the magistrates and other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, aided by a lawyer or two, and the talents of an experienced detective.

As on the day before, the premises are inspected, the grounds gone over, the fields traversed, the woods as well, while parties proceed up and down the river, and along both sides of the backwash. The eyot also is quartered, and carefully explored from end to end.

As yet the drag has not been called into requisition; the deep flood, with a swift, strong current preventing it. Partly that, but as much because the searchers do not as yet believe—cannot realize the fact—that Gwendoline Wynn is dead, and her body at the bottom of the Wye! Robbed and drowned! Surely it cannot be?

Equally incredible that she has drowned herself. Suicide is not thought of—incredible under the circumstances.

A third supposition, that she has been the victim of revenge—of a jealous lover's spite—seems alike untenable. She, the

heiress, owner of the vast Llangorren estates, to be so dealt with—pitched into the river like some poor cottage girl, who has quarrelled with a brutal sweetheart! The thing is preposterous!

And yet this very thing begins to receive credence in the minds of many—of more, as new facts are developed by the magisterial enquiry, carried on inside the house. There a strange chapter of evidence comes out, or rather is elicited. Miss Linton's maid, Clarisse, is the author of it. This sportive creature confesses to having been out on the grounds as the ball was breaking up; and, lingering there till after the latest guest had taken departure, heard high voices, speaking as in anger. They came from the direction of the summer-house, and she recognized them as those of Mademoiselle and Le Capitaine—by the latter meaning Captain Ryecroft.

Startling testimony this, when taken in connection with the strayed ring; collateral to the ugly suspicion the latter had already conjured up.

Nor is the *femme de chambre* telling any untruth. She was in the grounds at that same hour, and heard the voices as affirmed. She had gone down to the boat dock in the hope of having a word with the handsome waterman ; and returned from it reluctantly, finding he had betaken himself to his boat.

She does not thus state her reason for so being abroad, but gives a different one. She was merely out to have a look at the illumination—the lamps and transparencies, still unextinguished—all natural enough. And questioned as to why she said nothing of it on the day before, her answer is equally evasive. Partly that she did not suppose the thing worth speaking of, and partly because she did not like to let people know that Mademoiselle had been behaving in that way—quarrelling with a gentleman.

In the flood of light just let in, no one any longer thinks that Miss Wynn has been robbed ; though it may be that she has suffered something worse. What for could have been the angry words ? And the quarrel ; how did it end ?

And now the name Ryecroft is on every tongue, no longer in cautious whisperings, but loudly pronounced. Why is he not here?

His absence is strange, unaccountable, under the circumstances. To none seeming more so than to those holding counsel inside, who have been made acquainted with the character of that waif—the gift ring—told he was the giver. He cannot be ignorant of what is passing at Llangorren. True, the hotel where he sojourns is in a town five miles off; but the affair has long since found its way thither, and the streets are full of it.

“I think we had better send for him,” observes Sir George Shenstone to his brother justices. “What say you, gentlemen?”

“Certainly; of course,” is the unanimous rejoinder.

“And the waterman, too?” queries another. “It appears that Captain Ryecroft came to the ball in a boat. Does anyone know who was his boatman?”

“A fellow named Wingate,” is the

answer given by young Shenstone. "He lives by the roadside, up the river, near Rugg's Ferry."

"Possibly he may be here, outside," says Sir George. "Go see!" This to one of the policemen at the door, who hurries off. Almost immediately to return—told by the people that Jack Wingate is not among them.

"That's strange, too!" remarks one of the magistrates. "Both should be brought hither at once—if they don't choose to come willingly."

"Oh!" exclaims Sir George, "they'll come willingly; no doubt. Let a policeman be despatched for Wingate. As for Captain Ryecroft, don't you think gentlemen, it would be only politeness to summon him in a different way. Suppose I write a note requesting his presence, with explanations?"

"That will be better," say several assenting.

This note is written, and a groom gallops off with it; while a policeman on foot

makes his way to the cottage of the Widow Wingate.

Nothing new transpires in their absence ; but on their return—both arriving about the same time—the agitation is intense. For both come back unaccompanied ; the groom bringing the report that Captain Ryecroft is no longer at the hotel—had left it on the day before by the first train for London !

The policeman's tale is, that Jack Wingate went off on the same day, and about the same early hour ; not by rail to London, but in his boat, down the river to the Bristol Channel !

Within less than a hour after a police officer is despatched to Chepstow, and further if need be ; while the detective, with one of the gentlemen accompanying, takes the next train for the metropolis.

CHAPTER XXI.

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER.

MAJOR MAHON is a soldier of the rollicking Irish type—good company as ever drank wine at a regimental mess-table, or whisky-and-water under the canvas of a tent. Brave in war, too, as evinced by sundry scars of wounds given by the sabres of rebellious sowars, and an empty sleeve dangling down by his side. This same token almost proclaims that he is no longer in the army. For he is not—having left it disabled at the close of the Indian Mutiny: after the relief of Lucknow, where he also parted with his arm.

He is not rich; one reason for his being in Boulogne—convenient place for men of moderate means. There he has rented a house, in which for nearly a twelvemonth he has been residing: a small domicile,

meublé. Still, large enough for his needs : for the Major, though nigh forty years of age, has never thought of getting married ; or, if so, has not carried out the intention. As a bachelor in the French watering-place, his income of five hundred per annum supplies all his wants—far better than if it were in an English one.

But enonomy is not his only reason for sojourning in Boulogne. There is another alike creditable to him, or more. He has a sister, much younger than himself, receiving education there ; an only sister, for whom he feels the strongest affection, and likes to be beside her.

For all he sees her only at stated times, and with no great frequency. Her school is attached to a convent, and she is in it as a *pensionnaire*.

All these matters are made known to Captain Ryecroft on the day after his arrival at Boulogne. Not in the morning. It has been spent in promenading through the streets of the lower town and along the *jetée*, with a visit to the grand lion of the

place, *l'Établissement de Bains*, ending in an hour or two passed at the "cercle" of which the Major is a member, and where his old campaigning comrade, against all protestations, is introduced to the half-dozen "good fellows as ever stretched legs under mahogany."

It is not till a later hour, however, after a quiet dinner in the Major's own house, and during a stroll upon the ramparts of the *Haute Ville*, that these confidences are given to his guest, with all the exuberant frankness of the Hibernian heart.

Ryecroft, though Irish himself, is of less communicative nature. A native of Dublin, he has Saxon in his blood, with some of its secretiveness; and the Major finds a difficulty in drawing him in reference to the particular reason of his interrupted journey to Paris. He essays, however, with as much skill as he can command, making approach as follows :

"What a time it seems, Ryecroft, since you and I have been together—an age! And yet, if I'm not wrong in my reckoning,

it was but a year ago. Yes; just twelve months, or thereabout. You remember, we met at the 'Rag,' and dined there, with Russel, of the Artillery."

"Of course I remember it."

"I've seen Russel since; about three months ago, when I was over in England. And by the way, 'twas from him I last heard of yourself."

"What had he to say about me?"

"Only that you were somewhere down west—on the Wye I think—salmon fishing. I know you were always good at casting a fly."

"That all he said?"

"Well, no;" admits the Major, with a sly, inquisitive glance at the other's face. "There was a trifle of a codicil added to the information about your whereabouts and occupation."

"What, may I ask?"

"That you'd been wonderfully successful in your angling; had hooked a very fine fish—a big one, besides—and sold out of the army; so that you might be free to

play it on your line; in fine, that you'd captured, safe landed, and intended staying by it for the rest of your days. Come, old boy! Don't be blushing about the thing; you know you can trust Charley Mahon. Is it true?"

"Is what true?" asks the other, with an air of assumed innocence.

"That you've caught the richest heiress in Herefordshire, or she you, or each the other, as Russel had it, and which is best for both of you. Down on your knees, Ryecroft! Confess!"

"Major Mahon! If you wish me to remain your guest for another night—another hour—you'll not ask me aught about that affair nor even name it. In time I may tell you all; but now to speak of it gives me a pain which even you, one of my oldest, and I believe, truest friends cannot fully understand."

"I can at least understand that it's something serious." The inference is drawn less from Ryecroft's words than their tone and the look of utter desolation which

accompanies them. "But," continues the Major, greatly moved, "you'll forgive me, old fellow, for being so inquisitive? I promise not to press you any more. So let's drop the subject, and speak of something else."

"What then?" asks Ryecroft, scarce conscious of questioning.

"My little sister, if you like. I call her little because she was so when I went out to India. She's now a grown girl, tall as that, and, as flattering friends say, a great beauty. What's better, she's good. You see that building below?"

They are on the outer edge of the rampart, looking upon the ground adjacent to the *enceinte* of the ancient *cit  *. A slope in warlike days serving as the *glacis*, now occupied by dwellings, some of them pretentious, with gardens attached. That which the Major points to is one of the grandest, its enclosure large, with walls that only a man upon stilts of the Landes country could look over.

"I see—what of it!" asks the ex-Hussar.

“It’s the convent where Kate is at school—the prison in which she’s confined, I might better say,” he adds, with a laugh, but in tone more serious than jocular.

It need scarce be said that Major Mahon is a Roman Catholic. His sister being in such a seminary is evidence of that. But he is not bigoted, as Ryecroft knows, without drawing the deduction from his last remark.

His old friend and fellow-campaigner does not even ask explanation of it, only observing—

“A very fine mansion it appears—walks, shade trees, arbours, fountains. I had no idea the nuns were so well bestowed. They ought to live happily in such a pretty place. But then, shut up, domineered over, coerced, as I’ve heard they are—ah, liberty! It’s the only thing that makes the world worth living in.”

“Ditto, say I. I echo your sentiment, old fellow, and feel it. If I didn’t I might have been long ago a Benedict, with a millstone around my neck in the shape of

a wife, and half a score of smaller ones of the grindstone pattern—in piccaninnies. Instead, I'm free as the breezes, and by the Moll Kelly, intend remaining so!"

The Major winds up the ungallant declaration with a laugh. But this is not echoed by his companion, to whom the subject touched upon is a tender one.

Perceiving it so, Mahon makes a fresh start in the conversation, remarking—

"It's beginning to feel a bit chilly up here. Suppose we saunter down to the Cercle, and have a game of billiards!"

"If it be all the same to you, Mahon, I'd rather not go there to night."

"Oh! it's all the same to me. Let us home, then, and warm up with a tumbler of whisky toddy. There were orders left for the kettle to be kept on the boil. I see you still want cheering, and there's nothing will do that like a drop of the *crather*. *Allons!*"

Without resisting, Ryecroft follows his friend down the stairs of the rampart. From the point where they descended the shortest way to the Rue Tintelleries is

through a narrow lane not much used, upon which abut only the back walls of gardens, with their gates or doors. One of these, a gaol-like affair, is the entrance to the convent in which Miss Mahon is at school. As they approach it a *fiacre* is standing in front, as if but lately drawn up to deliver its fare—a traveller. There is a lamp, and by its light, dim nevertheless, they see that luggage is being taken inside. Some one on a visit to the Convent, or returning after absence. Nothing strange in all that; and neither of the two men make remark upon it, but keep on.

Just however, as they are passing the hack, about to drive off again, Captain Ryecroft, looking towards the door still ajar, sees a face inside it which causes him to start.

“What is it?” asks the Major, who feels the spasmodic movement—the two walking arm-in-arm.

“Well! if it wasn’t that I am in Boulogne instead of on the banks of the river Wye, I’d swear that I saw a man

inside that doorway whom I met not many days ago in the shire of Hereford.

“What sort of a man?”

“A priest!”

“Oh! black’s no mark among sheep. The *prêtres* are all alike, as peas or policemen. I’m often puzzled myself to tell one from t’other.”

Satisfied with this explanation, the ex-Hussar says nothing further on the subject, and they continue on to the Rue Tintelleries.

Entering his house, the Major calls for “matayrials,” and they sit down to the steaming punch. But before their glasses are half emptied, there is a ring at the door bell, and soon after a voice inquiring for “Captain Ryecroft.” The entrance-hall being contiguous to the dining-room where they are seated, they hear all this.

“Who can be asking for me?” queries Ryecroft, looking towards his host.

The Major cannot tell—cannot think—who. But the answer is given by his Irish manservant entering with a card,

which he presents to Captain Ryecroft, saying,

“It’s for you, yer honner.”

The name on the card is—

“MR. GEORGE SHENSTONE.”

CHAPTER XXII.

WHAT DOES HE WANT ?

“MR. GEORGE SHENSTONE?” queries Captain Ryecroft, reading from the card. “George Shenstone!” he repeats with a look of blank astonishment—“What the deuce does it mean?”

“Does what mean?” asks the Major, catching the other’s surprise.

“Why, this gentleman being here. You see that?” He tosses the card across the table.

“Well; what of it?”

“Read the name!”

“Mr. George Shenstone. Don’t know the man. Haven’t the most distant idea who he is. Have you?”

“O, yes.”

“Old acquaintance; friend, I presume? No enemy, I hope?”

"If it be the son of a Sir George Shenstone, of Herefordshire, I can't call him either friend or enemy; and as I know nobody else of the name, I suppose it must be he. If so, what he wants with me is a question I can no more answer than the man in the moon. I must get the answer from himself. Can I take the liberty of asking him into your house, Mahon?"

"Certainly, my dear boy! Bring him in here, if you like, and let him join us——"

"Thanks, Major!" interrupts Ryecroft. "But no, I'd prefer first having a word with him alone. Instead of drinking, he may want fighting with me."

"O ho!" ejaculates the Major. "Murtagh!" to the servant, an old soldier of the 18th, "show the gentleman into the drawing-room."

"Mr. Shenstone and I," proceeds Ryecroft in explanation, "have but the very slightest acquaintance. I've only met him a few times in general company, the last at a ball—a private one—just three nights

ago. 'Twas that very morning I met the priest, I supposed we'd seen up there. 'Twould seem as if everybody on the Wyeseid had taken the fancy to follow me into France."

"Ha—ha—ha! About the *prêtre*, no doubt you're mistaken. And maybe this isn't your man, either. The same name, you're sure!"

"Quite. The Herefordshire baronet's son is George, as his father, to whose title he is heir. I never heard of his having any other——"

"Stay!" interrupts the Major, again glancing at the card, "here's something to help identification—an address—*Orme-ton Hall*."

"Ah! I didn't observe that." In his agitation he had not, the address being in small script at the corner. "Orme-ton Hall? Yes, I remember, Sir George's residence is so called. Of course it's the son—must be."

"But why do you think he means fight? Something happened between you, eh?"

“No ; nothing between us, directly.”

“Ah ! Indirectly, then ? Of course the old trouble—a woman.”

“Well ; if it be fighting the fellow’s after, I suppose it must be about that,” slowly rejoins Ryecroft, half in soliloquy and pondering over what took place on the night of the ball. Now vividly recalling that scene in the summer-house, with the angry words there spoken, he feels good as certain George Shenstone has come after him on the part of Miss Wynn.

The thought of such championship stirs his indignation, and he exclaims—

“By Heavens ! he shall have what he wants. But I mustn’t keep him waiting. Give me that card, Major ! ”

The Major returns it to him, coolly observing—

“If it is to be a blue pill, instead of a whisky punch, I can accommodate you with a brace of barkers, good as can be got in Boulogne. You haven’t told me what your quarrel’s about ; but from what I know of you, Ryecroft, I take it you’re in

the right, and you can count on me as a second. Lucky it's my left wing that's clipped. With the right I can shoot straight as ever—should there be need for making it a four-cornered affair."

"Thanks, Mahon! You're just the man I'd have asked such a favour from."

"The gentleman's inside the dhrawin-room, surr."

This from the ex-Royal Irish, who has again presented himself, saluting.

"Don't yield the *Sassenach* an inch?" counsels the Major, a little of the old Celtic hostility stirring within him. "If he demand explanations, hand him over to me. I'll give them to his satisfaction. So, old fellow, be firm!"

"Never fear!" returns Ryecroft, as he steps out to receive the unexpected visitor, whose business with him he fully believes to have reference to Gwendoline Wynn.

And so has it. But not in the sense he anticipates, nor about the scene on which his thoughts have dwelt. George Shenstone is not there to call him to account

for angry words, or rudeness of behaviour. Something more serious; since it was the baronet's son who left Llangorren Court in company with the plain clothes policeman. The latter is still along with him; though not inside the house. He is standing upon the street at a convenient distance; though not with any expectation of being called in, or required for any farther service now, professionally. Holding no writ, nor the right to serve such if he had it, his action hitherto has been simply to assist Mr. Shenstone in finding the man suspected of either abduction or murder. But as neither crime is yet proved to have been committed, much less brought home to him, the English policeman has no further errand in Boulogne—while the English gentleman now feels that his is almost as idle and aimless. The impulse which carried him thither, though honourable and gallant, was begot in the heat of blind passion. Gwen Wynn having no brother, he determined to take the place of one, his father not saying nay. And so

resolved he had set out to seek the supposed criminal, "interview" him, and then act according to the circumstances, as they should develop themselves.

In the finding of his man he has experienced no difficulty. Luggage labelled "LANGHAM HOTEL, LONDON," gave him hot scent, as far as the grand *caravan-serai* at the bottom of Portland Place. Beyond it was equally fresh, and lifted with like ease. The traveller's traps re-directed at the Langham "PARIS *via* FOLKESTONE and BOULOGNE"—the new address there noted by porters and traffic manager—was indication sufficient to guide George Shenstone across the Channel; and cross it he did by the next day's packet for Boulogne.

Arrived in the French seaport, he would have gone straight on to Paris—had he been alone. But accompanied by the policeman the result was different. This—an old dog of the detective breed—soon as setting foot on French soil, went sniffing about among *serjents de ville* and *douaniers*,

the upshot of his investigations being to bring the chase to an abrupt termination—he finding that the game had gone no further. In short, from information received at the Custom House, Captain Ryecroft was run to earth in the Rue Tintelleries, under the roof of Major Mahon.

And now that George Shenstone is himself under it, having sent in his card, and been ushered into the drawing-room, he does not feel at his ease; instead greatly embarrassed. Not from any personal fear; he has too much “pluck” for that. It is a sense of delicacy, consequent upon some dread of wrong doing. What, after all, if his suspicions prove groundless, and it turn out that Captain Ryecroft is entirely innocent? His heart, torn by sorrow, exasperated with anger, starting away from Herefordshire he did not thus interrogate. Then he supposed himself in pursuit of an abductor, who, when overtaken, would be found in the company of the abducted.

But, meanwhile, both his suspicions and sentiments have undergone a change.

How could they otherwise? He pursued, has been travelling openly and without any disguise, leaving traces at every turn and deflection of his route, plain as fingerposts! A man guilty of aught illegal—much more one who has committed a capital crime—would not be acting thus? Besides, Captain Ryecroft has been journeying alone, unaccompanied by man or woman; no one seen with him until meeting his friend, Major Mahon, on the packet landing at Boulogne!

No wonder that Mr. Shenstone, now *au fait* to all this—easily ascertained along the route of travel—feels that his errand is an awkward one. Embarrassed when ringing Major Mahon's door bell, he is still more so inside that room, while awaiting the man to whom his card has been taken. For he has intruded himself into the house of a gentleman a perfect stranger to himself—to call his guest to account! The act is inexcusable, rude almost to grotesqueness!

But there are other circumstances atten-

dant, of themselves unpleasant enough. The thing he has been tracking up is no timid hare, or cowardly fox ; but a man, a soldier, gentleman as himself, who, like a tiger of the jungles, may turn upon and tear him.

It is no thought of this, no craven fear which makes him pace Major Mahon's drawing-room floor so excitedly. His agitation is due to a different and nobler cause—the sensibility of the gentleman, with the dread of shame, should he find himself mistaken. But he has a consoling thought. Prompted by honour and affection, he embarked in the affair, and still urged by them he will carry it to the conclusion *coûte que coûte*.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A GAGE D'AMOUR.

PACING to and fro, with stride jerky and irregular, Shenstone at length makes stop in front of the fireplace, not to warm himself—there is no fire in the grate—nor yet to survey his face in the mirror above. His steps are arrested by something he sees resting upon the mantel-shelf; a sparkling object—in short a cigar-case of the beaded pattern.

Why should that attract the attention of the young Herefordshire squire, causing him to start, as it first catches his eye? In his lifetime he has seen scores of such, without caring to give them a second glance. But it is just because he has looked upon this one before, or fancies he has, that he now stands gazing at it;

on the instant after reaching towards, and taking it up.

Ay, more than once has he seen that same cigar-case—he is now sure as he holds it in hand, turning it over and over—seen it before its embroidery was finished; watched fair fingers stitching the beads on, cunningly combining the blue and amber and gold, tastefully arranging them in rows and figures—two hearts central transfixed by a barbed and feathered shaft—all save the lettering he now looks upon, and which was never shown him. Many a time during the months past, he had hoped, and fondly imagined, the skilful contrivance and elaborate workmanship might be for himself. Now he knows better; the knowledge revealed to him by the initials V. R. entwined in monogram, and the words underneath “FROM GWEN.”

Three days ago, the discovery would have caused him a spasm of keenest pain. Not so now. After being shown that betrothal ring, no gift, no pledge, could move him to further emotion. He but

tosses the beaded thing back upon the mantel, with the reflection that he to whom it belongs has been born under a more propitious star than himself.

Still the little incident is not without effect. It restores his firmness, with the resolution to act as originally intended. This is still further strengthened, as Rye-croft enters the room, and he looks upon the man who has caused him so much misery. A man feared but not hated—for Shenstone's noble nature and generous disposition hinder him from being blinded either to the superior personal or mental qualities of his rival. A rival he fears only in the field of love; in that of war or strife of other kind, the doughty young west-country squire would dare even the devil. No tremor in his frame; no unsteadfastness in the glance of his eye, as he regards the other stepping inside the open door, and with the card in hand, coming towards him.

Long ago introduced, and several times in company together, but cool and distant,

they coldly salute. Holding out the card Ryecroft says interrogatively—

“Is this meant for me, Mr. Shenstone?”

“Yes.”

“Some matter of business, I presume. May I ask what it is?”

The formal inquiry, in tone passive and denying, throws the fox-hunter as upon his haunches. At the same time its evident cynicism stings him to a blunt if not rude rejoinder.

“I want to know—what you have done with Miss Wynn.”

He so challenged starts aback, turning pale. And looking distraught at his challenger, while he repeats the words of the latter, with but the personal pronoun changed—

“What I have done with Miss Wynn!” Then adding, “Pray explain yourself, sir!”

“Come, Captain Ryecroft; you know what I allude to?”

“For the life of me I don’t.”

“Do you mean to say you’re not aware of what’s happened?”

"What's happened! When? Where?"

"At Llangorren, the night of that ball. You were present; I saw you."

"And I saw you, Mr. Shenstone. But you don't tell me what happened."

"Not at the ball, but after."

"Well, and what after?"

"Captain Ryecroft, you're either an innocent man, or, the most guilty on the face of the earth."

"Stop, sir! Language like yours requires justification, of the gravest kind. I ask an explanation—demand it!"

Thus brought to bay, George Shenstone looks straight in the face of the man he has so savagely assailed; there to see neither consciousness of guilt, nor fear of punishment. Instead, honest surprise mingled with keen apprehension; the last not on his own account, but hers of whom they are speaking. Intuitively, as if whispered by an angel in his ear, he says, or thinks to himself: "This man knows nothing of Gwendoline Wynn. If she has been carried off, it has not

been by him; if murdered, he is not her murderer."

"Captain Ryecroft," he at length cries out in hoarse voice, the revulsion of feeling almost choking him, "if I've been wronging you I ask forgiveness; and you'll forgive. For if I have, you do not—cannot know what has occurred."

"I've told you I don't," affirms Ryecroft, now certain that the other speaks of something different, and more serious than the affair he had himself been thinking of. "For Heaven's sake, Mr. Shenstone, explain! What *has* occurred there?"

"Miss Wynn is gone away!"

"Miss Wynn gone away! But whither?"

"Nobody knows. All that can be said is, she disappeared on the night of the ball, without telling any one—no trace left behind—except——"

"Except what?"

"A ring—a diamond cluster. I found it myself in the summer-house. You know the place—you know the ring too?"

"I do, Mr. Shenstone; have reasons,

painful ones. But I am not called upon to give them now, nor to you. What could it mean?" he adds, speaking to himself, thinking of that cry he heard when being rowed off. It connects itself with what he hears now; seems once more resounding in his ears, more than ever resembling a shriek! "But, sir; please proceed! For God's sake, keep nothing back—tell me everything!"

Thus appealed to, Shenstone answers by giving an account of what has occurred at Llangorren Court—all that had transpired previous to his leaving; and frankly confesses his own reasons for being in Boulogne.

The manner in which it is received still further satisfying him of the other's guiltlessness, he again begs to be forgiven for the suspicions he had entertained.

"Mr. Shenstone," returns Ryecroft, "you ask what I am ready and willing to grant—God knows how ready, how willing. If any misfortune has befallen her we are speaking of, however great your grief, it cannot be greater than mine."

Shenstone is convinced. Ryecroft's speech, his looks, his whole bearing, are those of a man not only guiltless of wrong to Gwendoline Wynn, but one who, on her account, feels anxiety keen as his own.

He stays not to question further ; but once more making apologies for his intrusion—which are accepted without anger—he bows himself back into the street.

The business of his travelling companion in Boulogne was over some time ago. His is now equally ended ; and though without having thrown any new light on the mystery of Miss Wynn's disappearance, still with some satisfaction to himself, he dares not dwell upon. Where is the man who would not rather know his sweetheart dead than see her in the arms of a rival ? However ignoble the feeling, or base to entertain it, it is natural to the human heart tortured by jealousy. Too natural, as George Shenstone that night knows, with head tossing upon a sleepless pillow. Too late to catch the Folkestone packet,

his bed is in Boulogne—no bed of roses but a couch Procrustean.

* * * *

Meanwhile, Captain Ryecroft returns to the room where his friend the Major has been awaiting him. Impatiently, though not in the interim unemployed; as evinced by a flat mahogany box upon the table, and beside it a brace of duelling pistols, which have evidently been submitted to examination. They are the “best barkers that can be got in Boulogne.”

“We shan’t need them, Major, after all.”

“The devil we shan’t! He’s shown the white feather?”

“No, Mahon; instead, proved himself as brave a fellow as ever stood before sword point, or dared pistol bullet?”

“Then there’s no trouble between you?”

“Ah! yes, trouble; but not between us. Sorrow shared by both. We’re in the same boat.”

“In that case, why didn’t you bring him in?”

“I didn’t think of it.”

"Well; we'll drink his health. And since you say you've both embarked in the same boat—a bad one—here's to your reaching a good haven, and in safety!"

"Thanks, Major! The haven I now want to reach, and intend entering ere another sun sets, is the harbour of Folkestone."

The Major almost drops his glass.

"Why, Ryecroft, you're surely joking?"

"No, Mahon; I'm in earnest—dead anxious earnest."

"Well, I wonder! No, I don't," he adds, correcting himself. "A man needn't be surprised at anything where there's a woman concerned. May the devil take her, who's taking you away from me!"

"Major Mahon!"

"Well—well, old boy! Don't be angry. I meant nothing personal, knowing neither the lady, nor the reason for thus changing your mind, and so soon leaving me. Let my sorrow at that be my excuse."

"You shall be told it, this night—now!"

In another hour Major Mahon is in pos-

session of all that relates to Gwendoline Wynn, known to Vivian Ryecroft; no more wondering at the anxiety of his guest to get back to England; nor doing aught to detain him. Instead, he counsels his immediate return; accompanies him to the first morning packet for Folkestone; and at the parting hand-shake again reminds him of that well-timed grip in the ditch of Delhi, exclaiming—

“God bless you, old boy! Whatever the upshot, remember you’ve a friend, and a bit of a tent to shelter you in Boulogne—not forgetting a little comfort from the *crayther!*”

CHAPTER XXIV.

SUICIDE, OR MURDER.

Two more days have passed, and the crowd collected at Llangorren Court is larger than ever. But it is not now scattered, nor are people rushing excitedly about; instead, they stand thickly packed in a close clump, which covers all the carriage sweep in front of the house. For the search is over, the lost one has at length been found. Found, when the flood subsided, and the drag could do its work—*found drowned!*

Not far away, nor yet in the main river; but that narrow channel, deep and dark, inside the eyot. In a little angular embayment at the cliff's base, almost directly under the summer-house was the body discovered. It came to the surface soon as touched by the grappling iron, which caught in the loose drapery around it. Left

alone for another day it would have risen of itself.

Taken out of the water, and borne away to the house, it is now lying in the entrance hall, upon a long table there set centrally.

The hall, though a spacious one, is filled with people; and but for two policemen stationed at the door would be densely crowded. These have orders to admit only the friends and intimates of the family, with those whose duty requires them to be there officially. There is again a council in deliberation; but not as on days preceding. Then it was to inquire into what had become of Gwendoline Wynn, and whether she were still alive; to-day, it is an inquest being held over her dead body!

There lies it, just as it came out of the water. But, oh! how unlike what it was before being submerged! Those gossamer things, silks and laces—the dress worn by her at the ball—no more floating and feather-like, but saturated, mud-stained, “clinging like cerements” around a form whose statuesque outlines, even in death,

show the perfection of female beauty. And her chrome yellow hair, cast in loose coils about, has lost its silken gloss, and grown darker in hue: while the rich rose red is gone from her cheeks, already swollen and discoloured; so soon had the ruthless water commenced its ravages!

No one would know Gwen Wynn now. Seeing that form prostrate and pulseless, who could believe it the same, which but a few nights before was there moving about, erect, lissome, and majestic? Or in that face, dark and disfigured, who could recognize the once radiant countenance of Llangorren's young heiress? Sad to contemplate those mute motionless lips, so late wreathed with smiles, and speaking pleasant words! And those eyes, dulled with "muddy impurity," that so short while ago shone bright and gladsome, rejoicing in the gaiety of youth and the glory of beauty—sparkling, flashing, conquering!

All is different now; her hair dishevelled, her dress disordered and dripping, the only things upon her person unchanged being

the rings on her fingers, the wrist bracelets, the locket still pendant to her neck—all gemmed and gleaming as ever, the impure water affecting not their costly purity. And their presence has a significance, proclaiming an important fact, soon to be considered.

The Coroner, summoned in haste, has got upon the ground, selected his jury, and gone through the formularies for commencing the inquest. These over, the first point to be established is the identification of the body. There is little difficulty in this ; and it is solely through routine, and for form's sake, that the aunt of the deceased lady, her cousin, the lady's maid, and one or two other domestics are submitted to examination. All testify to their belief that the body before them is that of Gwendoline Wynn.

Miss Linton, after giving her testimony, is borne off to her room in hysterics ; while Eleanor Lees is led away weeping.

Then succeeds inquiry as to how the death has been brought about ; whether it be a case of suicide or assassination ? If

murder the motive cannot have been robbery. The jewellery, of grand value, forbids the supposition of this, checking all conjecture. And if suicide, why? That Miss Wynn should have taken her own life—made away with herself—is equally impossible of belief.

Some time is occupied in the investigation of facts, and drawing deductions. Witnesses of all classes and kinds thought worth the calling are called and questioned. Everything already known, or rumoured, is gone over again, till at length they arrive at the relations of Captain Ryecroft with the drowned lady. They are brought out in various ways, and by different witnesses; but only assume a sinister aspect in the eyes of the jury, on their hearing the tale of the French *femme de chambre*—strengthened, almost confirmed, by the incident of that ring found on the floor of the summer-house. The finder is not there to tell how; but Miss Linton, Miss Lees, and Mr. Musgrave, vouch for the fact at second hand.

The one most wanted is Vivian Ryecroft himself, and next to him the waterman Wingate. Neither has yet made appearance at Llangorren, nor has either been heard of. The policeman sent after the last has returned to report a bootless expedition. No word of the boatman at Chepstow, nor anywhere else down the river. And no wonder there is not; since young Powell and his friends have taken Jack's boat beyond the river's mouth—duck-shooting along the shores of the Severn sea—there camping out, and sleeping in places far from towns, or stations of the rural constabulary.

And the first is not yet expected—cannot be. From London George Shenstone had telegraphed:—"Captain Ryecroft gone to Paris, where he (Shenstone) would follow him." There has been no *telegram* later to know whether the followed has been found. Even if he have, there has not been time for return from the French metropolis.

Just as this conclusion has been reached by the coroner, his jury, the justices, and

other gentlemen interested in and assisting at the investigation inside the hall, to the surprise of those on the sweep without, George Shenstone presents himself in their midst; their excited movement with the murmur of voices proclaiming his advent. Still greater their astonishment when, shortly after—within a few seconds—Captain Ryecroft steps upon the same ground, as though the two had come thither in companionship! And so might it have been believed, but for two hotel hackneys seen drawn up on the drive outside the skirts of the crowd where they delivered their respective fares, after having brought them separately from the railway station.

Fellow travellers they have been, but whether friends or not, the people are surprised at the manner of their arrival; or rather, at seeing Captain Ryecroft so present himself. For in the days just past he has been the subject of a horrid suspicion, with the usual guesses and conjectures relating to it and him. Not only has he been freely calumniated, but doubts thrown out that

Ryecroft is his real name, and denial of his being an officer of the army, or ever having been; with bold, positive asseveration that he is a swindler and adventurer! All that while Gwen Wynn was but missing. Now that her body is found, since its discovery, still harsher have been the terms applied to him; at length, to culminate, in calling him a murderer!

Instead of voluntarily presenting himself at Llangorren alone, arms and limbs free, they expected to see him—if seen at all—with a policeman by his side, and manacles on his wrists!

Astonished, also, are those within the hall, though in a milder degree, and from different causes. They did not look for the man to be brought before them handcuffed; but no more did they anticipate seeing him enter almost simultaneously, and side by side, with George Shenstone; they, not having the hackney carriages in sight, taking it for granted that the two have been travelling together.

However strange or incongruous the com-

panionship, those noting have no time to reflect about it; their attention being called to a scene that, for a while, fixes and engrosses it.

Going wider apart as they approach the table, on which lies the body, Shenstone and Ryecroft take opposite sides—coming to a stand, each in his own attitude. From information already imparted to them they have been prepared to see a corpse, but not such as that! Where is the beautiful woman, by both beloved, fondly, passionately? Can it be possible, that what they are looking upon is she who once was Gwendoline Wynn?

Whatever their reflections, or whether alike, neither makes them known in words. Instead, both stand speechless, stunned—withered-like, as two strong trees simultaneously scathed by lightning—the bolt which has blasted them lying between!

CHAPTER XXV.

A PLENTIFUL CORRESPONDENCE.

IF Captain Ryecroft's sudden departure from Herefordshire brought suspicion upon him, his reappearance goes far to remove it. For that this is voluntary soon becomes known. The returned policeman has communicated the fact to his fellow-professionals, it is by them further disseminated among the people assembled outside.

From the same source other information is obtained in favour of the man they have been so rashly and gravely accusing. The time of his starting off, the mode of making his journey, without any attempt to conceal his route of travel or cover his tracks—instead, leaving them so marked that any messenger, even the simplest, might have followed and found him. Only a fool fleeing

from justice would have so fled, or one seeking to escape punishment for some trivial offence. But not a man guilty of murder.

Besides, is he not back there—come of his own accord—to confront his accusers, if any there still be? So runs the reasoning throughout the crowd on the carriage sweep.

With the gentlemen inside the house, equally complete is the revolution of sentiment in his favour. For, after the first violent outburst of grief, young Shenstone, in a few whispered words, makes known to them the particulars of his expedition to Boulogne, with that interview in the house of Major Mahon. Himself convinced of his rival's innocence, he urges his conviction on the others.

But before their eyes is a sight almost confirmatory of it. That look of concentrated anguish in Captain Ryecroft's eyes cannot be counterfeited. A soldier who sheds tears could not be an assassin; and as he stands in bent attitude, leaning over the table on which lies the corpse, tears are seen

stealing down his cheeks, while his bosom rises and falls in quick, convulsive heaving.

Shenstone is himself very similarly affected, and the bystanders beholding them are convinced that, in whatever way Gwendoline Wynn may have come by her death, the one is innocent of it as the other.

For all, justice requires that the accusations already made, or menaced, against Captain Ryecroft be cleared up. Indeed, he himself demands this, for he is aware of the rumours that have been abroad about him. On this account he is called upon by the Coroner to state what he knows concerning the melancholy subject of their enquiry.

But first George Shenstone is examined—as it were by way of skirmish, and to approach, in a manner delicate as possible, the man mainly, though doubtfully accused.

The baronet's son, beginning with the night of the ball—the fatal night—tells how he danced repeatedly with Miss Wynn; between two sets walked out with her over the lawn, stopped, and stood for some time

under a certain tree, where in conversation she made known to him the fact of her being betrothed by showing him the engagement ring. She did not say who gave it, but he surmised it to be Captain Ryecroft—was sure of its being he—even without the evidence of the engraved initials afterwards observed by him inside it.

As it has already been identified by others, he is only asked to state the circumstances under which he found it. Which he does, telling how he picked it up from the floor of the summer-house; but without alluding to his own motives for being there, or acting as he has throughout.

As he is not questioned about these, why should he? But there are many hearing him who guess them—not a few quite comprehending all. George Shenstone's mad love for Miss Wynn has been no secret, neither his pursuit of her for many long months, however hopeless it might have seemed to the initiated. His melancholy bearing now, which does not escape observation, would of itself tell the tale.

His testimony makes ready the ground for him who is looked upon less in the light of a witness than as one accused, by some once more, and more than ever so. For there are those present who not only were at the ball, but noticed that triangular byplay upon which Shenstone's tale, without his intending it, has thrown a sinister light. Alongside the story of Clarisse, there seems to have been motive, almost enough for murder. An engagement angrily broken off—an actual quarrel—Gwendoline Wynn never afterwards seen alive! That quarrel, too, by the water's edge, on a cliff at whose base her body has been found! Strange—altogether improbable—that she should have drowned herself. Far easier to believe that he, her *fiancé*, in a moment of mad, headlong passion, prompted by fell jealousy, had hurled her over the high bank.

Against this returned current of adverse sentiment, Captain Ryecroft is called upon to give his account, and state all he knows. What he will say is weighted with heavy

consequences to himself. It may leave him at liberty to depart from the spot voluntarily, as he came, or be taken from it in custody. But he is yet free, and so left to tell his tale, no one interrupting.

And without circumlocution he tells it, concealing nought that may be needed for its comprehension—not even his delicate relations to the unfortunate lady. He confesses his love—his proposal of marriage—its acceptance—the bestowal of the ring—his jealousy and its cause—the ebullition of angry words between him and his betrothed—the so-called quarrel—her returning the ring, with the way, and why he did not take it back—because at that painful crisis he neither thought of nor cared for such a trifle. Then parting with, and leaving her within the pavilion, he hastened away to his boat, and was rowed off. But, while passing up stream, he again caught sight of her, still standing in the summer-house, apparently leaning upon, and looking over, its baluster rail. His boat moving on, and trees coming between he no more saw her ;

but soon after heard a cry—his waterman as well—startling both.

It is a new statement in evidence, which startles those listening to him. He could not comprehend, and cannot explain it; though now knowing it must have been the voice of Gwendoline Wynn—perhaps her last utterance in life.

He had commanded his boatman to hold way, and they dropped back down stream again to get within sight of the summer-house, but then to see it dark, and to all appearance deserted.

Afterwards he proceeded home to his hotel, there to sit up for the remainder of the night, packing and otherwise preparing for his journey—of itself a consequence of the angry parting with his betrothed, and the pledge so slightly returned.

In the morning he wrote to her, directing the letter to be dropped into the post office; which he knew to have been done before his leaving the hotel for the railway station.

“Has any letter reached Llangorren Court?” enquires the Coroner, turning from

the witness, and putting the question in a general way. "I mean for Miss Wynn—since the night of that ball?"

The butler present, stepping forward, answers in the affirmative, saying—

"There are a good many for Miss Gwen since—some almost coming in every post."

Although there is, or was, but one Miss Gwen Wynn at Llangorren, the head servant, as the others, from habit calls her 'Miss Gwen,' speaking of her as if she were still alive.

"It is your place to look after the letters, I believe?"

"Yes; I attend to that."

"What have you done with those addressed to Miss Wynn?"

"I gave them to Gibbons, Miss Gwen's lady's-maid."

"Let Gibbons be called again!" directs the Coroner.

The girl is brought in the second time, having been already examined at some length, and, as before, confessing her neglect of duty.

“Mr. Williams,” proceeds the examiner, “gave you some letters for your late mistress. What have you done with them?”

“I took them upstairs to Miss Gwen’s room.”

“Are they there still?”

“Yes; on the dressing table, where she always had the letters left for her.”

“Be good enough to bring them down here. Bring all.”

Another pause in the proceedings while Gibbons is off after the now posthumous correspondence of the deceased lady, during which whisperings are interchanged between the Coroner and jurymen, asking questions of one another. They relate to a circumstance seeming strange; that nothing has been said about these letters before—at least to those engaged in the investigation.

The explanation, however, is given—a reason evident and easily understood. They have seen the state of mind in which the two ladies of the establishment are—Miss Linton almost beside herself, Eleanor Lees not far from the same. In the excitement

of occurrences neither has given thought to letters, even having forgotten the one which so occupied their attention on that day when Gwen was missed from her seat at the breakfast table. It might not have been seen by them then, but for Gibbons not being in the way to take it upstairs as usual. These facts, or rather deductions, are informal, and discussed while the maid is absent on her errand.

She is gone but for a few seconds, returning, waiter in hand, with a pile of letters upon it, which she presents in the orthodox fashion. Counted there are more than a dozen of them, the deceased lady having largely corresponded. A general favourite—to say nothing of her youth, beauty, and riches—she had friends far and near; and, as the butler had stated, letters coming by “almost every post”—that but once a day, however, Llangorren lying far from a postal town, and having but one daily delivery. Those upon the tray are from ladies, as can be told by the delicate angular chirography—all except two, that show a rounder and

bolder hand. In the presence of her to whom they were addressed—now speechless and unprotesting—no breach of confidence to open them. One after another their envelopes are torn off, and they are submitted to the jury—those of the lady correspondents first. Not to be deliberately read, but only glanced at, to see if they contain aught relating to the matter in hand. Still, it takes time; and would more were they all of the same pattern—double sheets, with the scrip crossed, and full to the four corners.

Fortunately, but a few of them are thus prolix and puzzling; the greater number being notes about the late ball, birthday congratulations, invitations to “at homes,” dinner-parties, and such like.

Recognizing their character, and that they have no relation to the subject of inquiry, the jurymen pass them through their fingers speedily as possible, and then turn with greater expectancy to the two in masculine handwriting. These the Coroner has meanwhile opened, and read to himself, finding

one signed "George Shenstone," the other "Vivian Ryecroft."

Nobody present is surprised to hear that one of the letters is Ryecroft's. They have been expecting it so. But not that the other is from the son of Sir George Shenstone. A word, however, from the young man himself explains how it came there, leaving the epistle to tell its own tale. For as both undoubtedly bear upon the matter of inquiry, the Coroner has directed both to be read aloud.

Whether by chance or otherwise, that of Shenstone is taken first. It is headed—

"Orleston Hall, 4 A.M., Après le bal."

The date, thus oddly indicated, seems to tell of the writer being in better spirits than might have been expected just at that time; possibly from a still lingering belief that all is not yet hopeless with him. Something of the same runs through the tone of his letter, if not its contents, which are—

"Dear Gwen,—I've got home, but can't turn in without writing you a word, to

say that, however sad I feel at what you've told me—and sad I am, God knows—if you think I shouldn't come near you any more—and from what I noticed last night, perhaps I ought not—only say so, and I will not. Your slightest word will be a command to one who, though no longer hoping to have your hand, will still hope and pray for your happiness. That one is,

“ Yours devotedly, if despairingly,

“ GEORGE SHENSTONE.

“ P.S.—Do not take the trouble of writing an answer. I would rather get it from your lips; and that you may have the opportunity of so giving it, I will call at the Court in the afternoon. Then you can say whether it is to be my last visit there. —G. S.”

The writer, present and listening, bravely bears himself. It is a terrible infliction, nevertheless, having his love secret thus revealed, his heart, as it were, laid open

before all the world. But he is too sad to feel it now; and makes no remark, save a word or two explanatory, in answer to questions from the Coroner.

Nor are any comments made upon the letter itself. All are too anxious as to the contents of that other, bearing the signature of the man who is to most of them a stranger.

It carries the address of the hotel in which he has been all summer sojourning, and its date is only an hour or two later than that of Shenstone's. No doubt, at the self-same moment the two men were pondering upon the words they intended writing to Gwendoline Wynn — she who now can never read them.

Very different in spirit are their epistles, unlike as the men themselves. But, so too, are the circumstances that dictated them, that of Ryecroft reads thus :—

“Gwendoline, — While you are reading this I shall be on my way to London, where I shall stay to receive your answer—

if you think it worth while to give one. After parting as we've done, possibly you will not. When you so scornfully cast away that little love-token it told me a tale—I may say a bitter one—that you never really regarded the gift, nor cared for the giver. Is that true, Gwendoline? If not, and I am wronging you, may God forgive me. And I would crave your forgiveness; entreat you to let me replace the ring upon your finger. But if true—and you know best—then you can take it up—supposing it is still upon the floor where you flung it—fling it into the river, and forget him who gave it.

“VIVIAN RYECROFT.”

To this half-doubting, half-defiant epistle there is also a postscript :—

“I shall be at the Langham Hotel, London, till to-morrow noon; where your answer, if any, will reach me. Should none come, I shall conclude that all is ended between us, and henceforth you

will neither need, nor desire, to know my address.

“V. R.”

The contents of the letter make a vivid impression on all present. Its tone of earnestness, almost anger, could not be assumed or pretended. Beyond doubt, it was written under the circumstances stated; and, taken in conjunction with the writer's statement of other events, given in such a clear, straightforward manner, there is again complete revulsion of feeling in his favour, and once more a full belief in his innocence. Which questioning him by cross-examination fails to shake, instead strengthens; and, when, at length, having given explanation of everything, he is permitted to take his place among the spectators and mourners, it is with little fear of being dragged away from Llangorren Court in the character of a criminal.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FOUND DROWNED.

As a pack of hounds thrown off the scent, but a moment before hot, now cold, are the Coroner and his jury.

But only in one sense like the dogs these human searchers. There is nothing of the sleuth in their search, and they are but too glad to find the game they have been pursuing and lost is a noble stag, instead of a treacherous wicked wolf.

Not a doubt remains in their minds of the innocence of Captain Ryecroft—not the shadow of one. If there were, it is soon to be dissipated. For while they are deliberating on what had best next be done, a noise outside, a buzz of voices, excited exclamations, at length culminating in a cheer, tell of some one fresh arrived and received triumphantly.

They are not left long to conjecture who the new arrival is. One of the policemen stationed at the door stepping aside tells who—the man after Captain Ryecroft himself most wanted. No need saying it is Jack Wingate.

But a word about how the waterman has come thither, arriving at such a time, and why not sooner. It is all in a nutshell. But the hour before he returned from the duck shooting expedition on the shores of the Severn sea, with his boat brought back by road—on a donkey cart. On arrival at his home, and hearing of the great event at Llangorren, he had launched his skiff, leaped into it, and pulled himself down to the Court as if rowing in a regatta.

In the *patois* of the American prairies he is now “arrove,” and, still panting for breath, is brought before the Coroner’s Court, and submitted to examination. His testimony confirms that of his old fare—in every particular about which he can testify. All the more credible is it from his own character. The young waterman is

well known as a man of veracity—incapable of bearing false witness.

When he tells them that after the Captain had joined him, and was still with him in the boat, he not only saw a lady in the little house overhead, but recognised her as the young mistress of Llangorren—when he positively swears to the fact—no one any more thinks that she whose body lies dead was drowned or otherwise injured by the man standing bowed and broken over it. Least of all the other, who alike suffers and sorrows. For soon as Wingate has finished giving evidence, George Shenstone steps forward, and holding out his hand to his late rival, says, in the hearing of all—

“Forgive me, sir, for having wronged you by suspicion ! I now make reparation for it in the only way I can—by declaring that I believe you as innocent as myself.”

The generous behaviour of the baronet's son strikes home to every heart, and his example is imitated by others. Hands from every side are stretched towards that of the stranger, giving it a grasp which tells of

their owners being also convinced of his innocence.

But the inquest is not yet ended—not for hours. Over the dead body of one in social rank as she, no mere perfunctory investigation would satisfy the public demand, nor would any Coroner dare to withdraw till everything has been thoroughly sifted, and to the bottom.

In view of the new facts brought out by Captain Ryecroft and his boatman—above all that cry heard by them—suspicions of foul play are rife as ever, though no longer pointed at him.

As everything in the shape of verbal testimony worth taking has been taken, the Coroner calls upon his jury to go with him to the place where the body was taken out of the water. Leaving it in charge of two policemen, they sally forth from the house two and two, he preceding, the crowd pressing close.

First they visit the little dock, in which they see two boats—the *Gwendoline* and *Mary*—lying just as they were on that

night when Captain Ryecroft stepped across the one to take his seat in the other. He is with the Coroner—so is Wingate—and both questioned give minute account of that embarkation, again in brief *résumé* going over the circumstances that preceded and followed it.

The next move is to the summer-house, to which the distance from the dock is noted, one of the jurymen stepping it—the object to discover how time will correspond to the incidents as detailed. Not that there is any doubt about the truth of Captain Ryecroft's statements, nor those of the boatman; for both are fully believed. The measuring is only to assist in making calculation how long time may have intervened between the lovers' quarrel and the death-like cry, without thought of their having any connection—much less that the one was either cause or consequence of the other.

Again there is consultation at the summer-house, with questions asked, some of which are answered by George Shenstone, who

shows the spot where he picked up the ring. And outside, standing on the cliff's brink, Ryecroft and the waterman point to the place, near as they can fix it, where their boat was when the sad sound reached their ears, again recounting what they did after.

Remaining a while longer on the cliff, the Coroner and jury, with craned necks, look over its edge. Directly below is the little embayment in which the body was found. It is angular, somewhat horse-shoe shaped; the water within stagnant, which accounts for the corpse not having been swept away. There is not much current in the back-wash at any part; enough to have carried it off had the drowning been done elsewhere. But beyond doubt it has been there. Such is the conclusion arrived at by the Coroner's jury, firmly established in their minds, at sight of something hitherto unnoticed by them. For though not in a body, individually each had already inspected the place, negligently. But now in official form, with wits on the alert, one looking over detects certain abrasions on

the face of the cliff—scratches on the red sandstone—distinguishable by the fresher tint of the rock—unquestionably made by something that had fallen from above, and what but the body of Gwendoline Wynn? They see, moreover, some branches of a juniper bush near the cliff's base, broken, but still clinging. Through that the falling form must have descended!

There is no further doubting the fact. There went she over; the only questions undetermined being, whether with her own will, by misadventure, or man's violence. In other words, was it suicide, accident, or murder?

To the last many circumstances point, and especially the fact of the body remaining where it went into the water. A woman being drowned accidentally, or drowning herself, in the death struggle would have worked away some distance from the spot she had fallen, or thrown herself in. Still the same would occur if thrown in by another; only that this other might by some means have extinguished life beforehand.

This last thought, or surmise, carries Coroner and jury back to the house, and to a more particular examination of the body. In which they are assisted by medical men—surgeons and physicians—several of both being present, unofficially; among them the one who administers to the ailings of Miss Linton. There is none of them who has attended Gwendoline Wynn, who never knew ailment of any kind.

Their *post-mortem* examining does not extend to dissection. There is no need. Without it there are tests which tell the cause of death—that of drowning.

Beyond this they can throw no light on the affair, which remains mysterious as ever.

Flung back on reasoning of the analytical kind, the Coroner and his jury can come to no other conclusion than that the first plunge into the water, in whatever way made, was almost instantly fatal; and if a struggle followed it ended by the body returning to, and sinking in the same place where it first went down.

Among the people outside pass many surmises, guesses, and conjectures. Suspicions also, but no more pointing to Captain Ryecroft.

They take another, and more natural, direction. Still nothing has transpired to inculcate any one, or, in the finding of a Coroner's jury, connect man or woman with it.

This is at length pronounced in the usual formula, with its customary tag:—"FOUND DROWNED. BUT HOW, &c., &c."

With such ambiguous rendering the once beautiful body of Gwendoline Wynn is consigned to a coffin, and in due time deposited in the family vault, under the chancel of Llangorren Church.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MAN WHO THINKS IT MURDER.

HAD Gwendoline Wynn been a poor cottage girl, instead of a rich young lady—owner of estates—the world would soon have ceased to think of her. As it is most people have settled down to the belief that she has simply been the victim of a misadventure, her death due to accident.

Only a few have other thoughts, but none that she has committed suicide. The theory of *felo de se* is not entertained, because not entertainable. For, in addition to the testimony taken at the Coroner's inquest, other facts came out in examination by the magistrates, showing there was no adequate reason why she should put an end to her life. A lover's quarrel of a night's, still less an hour's duration, could not so result. And that there was nothing

beyond this Miss Linton is able to say assuredly. Still more Eleanor Lees, who, by confidences exchanged, and mutually imparted, was perfectly *au fait* to the feelings of her relative and friend—knew her hopes, and her fears, and that among the last there was none to justify the deed of despair. Doubts now and then, for when and where is love without them; but with Gwen Wynn slight, evanescent as the clouds in a summer sky. She was satisfied that Vivian Ryecroft loved her, as that she herself lived. How could it be otherwise? and her behaviour on the night of the ball was only a transient spite which would have passed off soon as the excitement was over, and calm reflection returned. Altogether impossible she could have given way to it so far as in wilful rage to take the last leap into eternity. More likely standing on the cliff's edge, anxiously straining her eyes after the boat which was bearing him away in anger, her foot slipped upon the rock, and she fell over into the flood.

So argues Eleanor Lees, and such is the

almost universal belief at the close of the inquest, and for some time after. And if not self-destruction, no more could it be murder with a view to robbery.

The valuable effects left untouched upon her person forbade supposition of that. If murder, the motive must have been other than the possession of a few hundred pounds' worth of jewellery. So reasons the world at large, naturally enough.

For all, there are a few who still cling to a suspicion of there having been foul play ; but not now with any reference to Captain Ryecroft. Nor are they the same who had suspected him. Those yet doubting the accidental death are the intimate friends of the Wynn family, who knew of its affairs relating to the property with the conditions on which the Llangorren estates were held. Up to this time only a limited number of individuals has been aware of their descent to Lewin Murdock. And when at length this fact comes out, and still more emphatically by the gentleman himself taking possession of them, the thoughts of the

people revert to the mystery of Miss Wynn's death, so unsatisfactorily cleared up at the Coroner's inquest.

Still the suspicions thus newly aroused, and pointing in another quarter, are confined to those acquainted with the character of the new man suspected. Nor are they many. Beyond the obscure corner of Rugg's Ferry there are few who have ever heard of, still fewer ever seen him. Outside the pale of "society," with most part of his life passed abroad, he is a stranger, not only to the gentry of the neighbourhood, but most of the common people as well. Jack Wingate chanced to have heard of him by reason of his proximity to Rugg's Ferry, and his own necessity for oft going there. But possibly as much on the account of the intimate relations existing between the owner of Glyngog House and Coracle Dick.

Others less interested know little of either individual, and when it is told that a Mr. Lewin Murdock has succeeded to the estates of Llangorren—at the same time it becoming known that he is the cousin of her whom

death has deprived of them—to the general public the succession seems natural enough ; since it has been long understood that the lady had no nearer relative.

Therefore, only the few intimately familiar with the facts relating to the reversion of the property held fast to the suspicion thus excited. But as no word came out, either at the inquest or elsewhere, and nothing has since arisen to justify it, they also begin to share the universal belief, that for the death of Gwendoline Wynn nobody is to blame.

Even George Shenstone, sorely grieving, accepts it thus. Of unsuspecting nature—in-capable of believing in a crime so terrible—a deed so dark, as that would infer—he cannot suppose that the gentleman now his nearest neighbour—for the lands of Llangorren ad-join those of his father—has come into possession of them by such foul means as murder.

His father may think differently, he knowing more of Lewin Murdock. Not much of his late life, but his earlier, with its surroundings and antecedents. Still Sir George is silent, whatever his thoughts.

It is not a subject to be lightly spoken of, or rashly commented upon.

There is one who, more than any other, reflects upon the sad fate of her whom he had so fondly loved, and differing from the rest as to how she came to her death—this one is Captain Ryecroft. He, too, might have yielded to the popular impression of its having been accidental, but for certain circumstances that have come to his knowledge, and which he has yet kept to himself. He had not forgotten what was, at an early period, communicated to him by the waterman Wingate, about the odd-looking old house up the glen; nor yet the uneasy manner of Gwendoline Wynn, when once in conversation with her he referred to the place and its occupier. This, with Jack's original story, and other details added, besides incidents that have since transpired, are recalled to him vividly on hearing that the owner of Glyngog has also become owner of Llangorren.

It is some time before this news reaches him. For just after the inquest an impor-

tant matter had arisen affecting some property of his own, which required his presence in Dublin—there for days detaining him. Having settled it, he has returned to the same town and hotel where he had been the summer sojourning. Nor came he back on errand aimless, but with a purpose. Ill-satisfied with the finding of the Coroner's jury, he is determined to investigate the affair in his own way.

Accident he does not believe in—least of all, that the lady having made a false step, had fallen over the cliff. When he last saw her she was inside the pavilion, leaning over the baluster rail, breast high; protected by it. If gazing after him and his boat, the position gave her as good a view as she could have. Why should she have gone outside? And the cry heard so soon after? It was not like that of one falling, and so far. In descent it would have been repeated, which it was not!

Of suicide he has never entertained a thought—above all, for the reason suggested—jealousy of himself. How could he, while

so keenly suffering it for her ! No, it could not be that ; nor suicide from any cause.

The more he ponders upon it, the surer grows he that Gwendoline Wynn has been the victim of a villainous murder. And it is for this reason he has returned to the Wye, first to satisfy himself of the fact ; then, if possible, to find the perpetrator, and bring him to justice.

As no robber has done the drowning, conjecture is narrowed to a point ; his suspicions finally becoming fixed on Lewin Murdock.

He may be mistaken, but will not surrender them until he find evidence of their being erroneous, or proof that they are correct. And to obtain it he will devote, if need be, all the rest of his days, with the remainder of his fortune. For what are either now to him ? In life he has had but one love, real, and reaching the height of a passion. She who inspired it is now sleeping her last sleep—lying cold in her tomb—his love and memory of her alone remaining warm.

His grief has been great, but its first wild throes have passed and he can reflect calmly—more carefully consider, what he should do. From the first some thoughts about Murdock were in his mind ; still only vague. Now, on returning to Herefordshire, and hearing what has happened meanwhile—for during his absence there has been a removal from Glyngog to Llangorren—the occurrence, so suggestive, restores his former train of reflection, placing things in a clearer light.

As the hunter, hitherto pursuing upon a cold trail, is excited by finding the slot fresher, so he. And so will he follow it to the end—the last trace or sign. For no game, however grand—elephant, lion, or tiger—could attract like that he believes himself to be after—a human tiger—a murderer.

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